CHAPTER III

THE EVANGELIZATION OF THE BARBARIANS

The invasions had brought about the collapse of the Roman Empire but had not disorganized the Church. The firm stand made by the bishops, including the bishop of Rome, as the sole defenders of peoples and cities against barbarian violence had, on the contrary, increased her prestige, and this is one of the good aspects of this chaotic time. But new problems faced her and of these the most urgent was to discover what political power was to succeed the Empire which had supported the Church since the days of Constantine.

Apart from the cities between the Seine and the Loire, "a pale reflection of the ruined Empire", which remained under the control of Syagrius, the whole of the West was occupied by the barbarians, Italy by the Ostrogoths (until the arrival of the Lombards), the Rhône valley by the Burgundians, Spain by the Suevi soon to be joined by the Visigoths who already governed Aquitania with Toulouse as their capital. Alsace and Lorraine were in the hands of the Alemanni, Africa in those of the Vandals. Finally, the Franks, who had first settled in the Tournai region, had advanced as far as the Loire after Clovis' victory over Syagrius at Soissons.

From the point of view of evangelization this barbarian world was divided into two groups. There were the totally pagan Franks, and the rest of the barbarians who for the most part had gone over to Arianism. On the one hand was a com-

plete ignorance of the faith, on the other, a corrupted knowledge which ruined its foundation since Christ's divine nature was denied.

Which task would prove the more difficult? To begin again from the beginning or to rectify a knowledge which was only partial? To win the pagan from his gods or to bring the Arian to admit that he was distorting the image of Christ? Hesitation was understandable and it is easy to see why the Gallo-Roman episcopate, as far as the pagans were concerned, watched with such interest the young Frankish chief, an ambitious man who had grasped the fact that Christianity held a preponderant place in Gallic society and constituted a real force which it would be better to win over to one's side rather than to attack.

It was in an atmosphere such as this and, on the whole, one not unfavourable to an understanding between Clovis and the bishops, that one of the latter, St Avitus, suggested to St Remi that the young chief should marry Clotilda, a Burgundian Catholic princess of exemplary piety. He hoped this might lead to Clovis' conversion. The marriage, celebrated in 493, did not at first change Clovis' inclinations. His first son died shortly after baptism. The second, who was also baptized, in his turn was at the point of death. Clotilda prayed that he might be cured. When Clovis saw that her prayer had been answered, he ceased to be hostile to the God of the Christians. He took the final step at Tolbiac in 496. It was like a story in a picture book. Seeing that victory was likely to escape him, Clovis promised to receive baptism if Clotilda's God should grant him success. His prayer was answered and the victorious chief was baptized at Rheims on Christmas Day, 496, together with three thousand of his soldiers.

This event raised great hopes. St Avitus, bishop of Vienne, greeted it as the starting-point of a new era which would gather all the peoples of Gaul under Clovis' rule "to the great advantage of the authority religion has to exercise". In the southern areas where the Arian chiefs were persecuting the Church, the king of the Franks soon came to be considered as a liberator,

as the man who would achieve political unity and the triumph of Catholicism over Arianism. We cannot doubt that he enthusiastically accepted this splendid assignment when we read the words attributed to him by Gregory of Tours: "I can no longer accept the fact that the Arians occupy part of Gaul. Let us then march against them with God's help, and if our enemies are conquered, we shall rule over the whole country."

This crusade against Arianism, begun at Tolbiac after the defeat of the Alemanni, was continued at Fleury with a crushing defeat of the Burgundians (500) and at Vouillé (507) by that of the Visigoths. Clovis thought he would end it in a final campaign against the Ostrogoths, but he died before he could launch it, in 511. But at least he had had time to prepare for the overthrow of Arianism and the triumph of the true faith in the West.

In any case, after his death, his story continued to have immense significance for the barbarian chiefs. Even the Arians among them were shaken and asked themselves whether they should remain faithful to Arianism once Clovis had triumphed over it in a perfectly regular manner? Why, too, should they not rally to Catholicism which from now onwards would be the conqueror's religion? It would certainly be untrue to urge that generosity and even a certain sense of the divine were unknown among the barbarians. The truth is that miracles as the outward sign of a mystery, in particular such a striking miracle as that of Tolbiac, demonstrated the powerlessness of their own gods to these men for whom might was everything. Clovis was the unchallengeable witness to the superiority of the Christians' God.

For the bishops the story of Clovis was valued as a precedent to be extended throughout the West. Following as it did upon that of Constantine, it suggested that it would be wise to attempt to convert sovereigns in the first place and that this initial stage would prepare for the conversion of their subjects. Among the Burgundians, the method was a complete success. After the baptism of Sigismund by the bishop of

Vienne (500), a considerable section of the aristocracy followed his example. So influential was the bishop who converted him that there was no outbreak of violence against the Arians. An edict placed the old Catholics of Gallo-Roman origin and the new Burgundian converts on an equal footing and the fusion of the two races was thus prepared.

St Martin of Braga obtained similar results among the Suevi, as did also St Leander among the Visigoths. But the latter's conversion was as violent in its circumstances as that of the former was easy and peaceful. Arianism had by no means overrun the whole of Spain, although Leovigild, king of the Visigoths, had given strong support to the heresy. Of his two sons, one, Reccared, was of the same opinion as himself. The other, Hermenigild, had renounced Arianism under the influence of St Leander, bishop of Seville. The antagonism between the two men led to civil war. At first, Hermenigild entered wholeheartedly into the struggle and even went so far as to send St Leander to Constantinople to ask for the emperor's support against his father's party. But then, out of filial piety, although fully believing in the justice of his own cause, he accepted the offer of negotiation sent to him by Reccared and gave himself up to his father, who pretended to pardon him, yet immediately afterwards had him cast into prison. He wanted his son to return to Arianism and to renounce the true faith. He failed to persuade him and handed him over to the executioners who cut his throat. Heresy gained nothing by this. On the contrary, Reccared who had succeeded his father, took up a more conciliatory attitude under the influence of St Leander and became better disposed. He agreed to call a council at Toledo in 589. The delegates of the clergy and of the people made a profession of orthodoxy, so that here again, unity of religion brought about peaceful racial fusion.

Apart from the warm congratulations addressed to St Remi by Pope Hormisdas after the conversion of Clovis, the share

of the papacy in the missions during this period seems to have been very limited. It could not have been otherwise at a time when the barbarians were piling ruin upon ruin and had to be resisted unless all was to be lost in both the temporal and the spiritual orders, at a time, too, when this resistance confined the ecclesiastical authorities within the territory over which they exercised their jurisdiction. Rome, like the other bishoprics, could not avoid this isolation nor these necessities.

St Leo himself, active and apostolic though he was, had to endure this state of affairs. Resistance to the barbarians kept him fully occupied. Attila was threatening Mantua and it was only by going out to meet him at the head of a deputation that St Leo persuaded him to withdraw. In less than three years later, he had to face Genseric, the king of the Vandals. In addition to material ruin, there were the dangers with which the heresies were threatening the true faith, Pelagianism, Eutychianism, Nestorianism, etc. St Leo's glory lies in having triumphed over all these difficulties and in having given decisions sufficiently authoritative to be accepted after his death.

Under succeeding pontificates, the invasions of the Lombards had made the prevalent disorder even worse. When the system of an elected monarchy had divided the Lombard kingdom into some thirty duchies while a large number of the cities still depended on Byzantium, anarchy reached its zenith.

It was at this moment that a great pope came onto the scene. He was able to make use of the situation in order to restore all its prestige to the papacy. Of patrician stock, he had been prefect of Rome. Yet honours had no attraction for him. He had heeded the Gospel counsel and, in his search for perfection, had sold all his immense property in order to provide endowment for monasteries. He himself had then withdrawn to one of these, on the Coelian hill. The conclave came to fetch him from it as the successor of Pelagius II (590). His name was Gregory.

Like St Leo, he resisted the anarchy and violence of the

barbarians and succeeded in containing them. He then followed the policy which St Remi and other bishops had found so successful and arranged a marriage between Agilulf, Duke of Turin, and Theodelinda, a Catholic princess whose spiritual director he was. Theodelinda did not become Italy's Clotilda, as he had hoped she would, but she did at least have her children baptized, and built churches, among them that of Monza where her memory is preserved. If St Columbanus (*c.* 530–615) was able towards the end of his life to found a monastery at Bobbio, it was because the surrounding regions had been christianized by this princess.

In Gaul, Gregory (590–604), an indefatigable letter-writer, gave spiritual direction to Childebert II, son of Brunehaut, whom he recommended to support efforts to evangelize the countryside, and as we have just seen, he had given the full force of his own support to St Leander in Spain against the partisans of Arianism.

England above all was the object of his apostolic zeal. After its entry into the framework of the Empire, the south of the island had had its missionaries. So well did they establish Christianity that the young Church of Britain could boast of its martyrs under Diocletian and of its three bishops at the Council of Arles in 314. The Saxon invasion of the fifth century had ravaged it but without disorganizing its hierarchy and its clergy or emptying its monasteries. But later the resentment felt by the invaded Britons against the invading Saxons remained for a long time so bitter that the former could not be asked, even when they were ordained priests, to share the work of evangelization of the latter.

Gregory the Great therefore decided to send them a mission whose members he recruited from among the monks on the Coelian. Forty of them set out under the leadership of Augustine their prior. It was the largest apostolic expedition that had ever been undertaken. It immediately succeeded in converting king Ethelbert whose initiation into the new faith had been the work of the queen, Bertha, a Parisian and a woman of the

same type as St Clotilda. Several monasteries were founded and Augustine became bishop of Canterbury.

Gregory the Great had thought out bold methods of placing the new church on solid foundations. As he wrote to Melitus, the monk founder of the see of London:

> Tell Augustine that after giving much consideration to the affairs of the English, I have decided it would be unwise to destroy the temples. Destroy the idols only, then sprinkle the buildings with holy water, erect altars and put relics in them. If these temples are well built, they can be transferred from the worship of demons to that of the true God. Thus the nation, seeing that its sanctuaries are left standing, will abandon its errors and acknowledge and worship the Lord. People will find it easier to come to the places which they have previously frequented.
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> [He uses the same tactics in regard to sacrifices:] Here again the previous custom must be transformed into the celebration of a Christian feast. Thus, on the day of the dedication, on the anniversary of the holy martyrs whose relics are venerated in the place, let the people put up their tents of leaves round the temples which have thus been transformed into churches and let them celebrate the feast with religious festivities. They are no longer to immolate animals to the devil but to kill them in God's honour and then eat them. And when they have had enough, let them give thanks to the author of all gifts.... It is impossible to change barbarian minds completely. This is most certainly true, for the top of a mountain can indeed be reached but only step by step not by leaps and bounds. It was in this way that God made himself known to the people of Israel.

Gregory the Great granted the pallium, the distinguishing mark of archbishops, to Augustine and announced that he had created two metropolitan sees, at Canterbury and at York. Each of these was to have twelve bishoprics under its direction. Neither he himself (he died in 604) nor Augustine, who died shortly after, was granted the privilege of working out this great plan in practice, but they had opened the way.

The Church of England met with many and considerable

difficulties. Fierce rivalry existed between princes who had remained pagan and their converted neighbours. Hostility persisted between the Britons belonging to the earlier Christian communities and the Saxon invaders. It was only when another band of missionaries arrived (*c.* 657) under the leadership of Theodore of Tarsus that charity triumphed and both parties were persuaded to submit to Rome.

The monasteries developed considerably. The most celebrated were Croyland and Wearmouth. From this time forward it was possible to speak of a Church of Britain, the Church which harboured the life of prayer and work of St Bede the Venerable.