CHAPTER II

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND ITS BORDER TERRITORIES

We should know nothing of the Christian centres founded throughout the Empire from the beginning of the second century onwards, were it not for a few passages dealing with the attitude of the imperial authority towards them. In the beginning this attitude was generally one of contempt based on the proud certitude that Graeco-Roman civilization had an outstanding, universal and imperishable value. It did not order persecutions *a priori*; it left Christians the choice between acceptance of the official worship or death. It is by means of the documents which give an account of the application of these regulations that we are able to follow the first trials and the first victories of Christianity.

Were it not for the terrible persecution of 177, we should certainly not know that it had taken firm enough root in the Lyons region to give seven martyrs to the Church of Gaul: Blandina, Biblis, Pothinus, bishop of Lyons and a native of Asia Minor (he was ninety years old at the time), Maturus, Sanctus, Ponticus and Attalus (?). Irenaeus, Pothinus' successor, a Greek and also a native of Asia, suffered martyrdom about the year 200. A passage from one of his letters gives us a useful summary of the situation of Christianity in the early years of the third century. "There are divers languages in the world, but the tradition of the faith is everywhere the same. The belief of the Churches of Germany is in no way different

from that of those in Iberia or among the Celts, or from that of those in Egypt and Palestine."

Except during the reigns of Decius, Valerian and Diocletian, who openly persecuted the Christians, the third century was on the whole a period of toleration. The Edict of Valerian, withdrawing from the Christians the right to form burial boards which had been granted to them by Septimius Severus, was especially directed against the upper classes. Christianity was therefore making sufficient progress to worry the public authorities. The philosopher Porphyry (233–304), a commentator and disciple of Plotinus, drew attention to this and was scandalized by it: "We come across them [the Christians] everywhere." Diocletian ordered the death penalty for civil servants who refused to abjure the Christian faith. Constantius Chlorus far from adopting the same attitude showed preference for these recalcitrant people. In his view, their resistance was a proof of their uprightness and fidelity. Lactantius mentions a town in Phrygia where all the inhabitants, including the civil and military chiefs and all the civil servants, were Christians.

Egypt and the part of Africa corresponding to the modern Tunisia were Christian. Christianity had taken root in Illyricum (now Yugoslavia), in Britain, along the Moselle, at Trier and Metz, along the Rhine (Cologne), at Lutetia, Rheims and in Spain.

The situation varied from province to province. Christians were in the majority in Asia Minor, southern Thrace, Cyprus, Armenia and the kingdom of Edessa. Their numbers equalled those of the pagans in Syria, Egypt, Greece, central and southern Italy, in proconsular Africa, southern Gaul and Spain. Their number was small in Palestine, Phoenicia, Arabia, the Danubian provinces, northern and eastern Italy, Mauritania and Tripolitania. Finally, they were only a tiny minority in the former Philistia, on the north and north-west coasts of the Black Sea, in the extreme north-west of Italy, the centre and north of Gaul, Belgium, Germany and Britain.

Constantine's victory over Maxentius (312) brought in its train the public recognition of Christianity. The attempted rejuvenation and humanization of paganism made by Julian the Apostate, who was Emperor from 361 to 363, came to nothing. Gratian (375–83) refused the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, which his predecessors, including Constantine, had borne. The last defender of paganism, Symmachus, prefect of Rome, tried about the year 383 to restore the altar of the tutelary goddess of the city in the Senate House. Two years previously, a considerable number of senators had rejected a similar request and made it clear that they would no longer go to the Senate House if it were complied with. St Ambrose had only to recall this precedent for Symmachus' motion to be defeated. It was Ambrose who told the Emperors how they should behave in regard to Church affairs. A few years later, Theodosius promulgated anti-pagan legislation. Paganism, devoid of faith, as Mgr Batiffol has written, and increasingly a mere matter of form, had become secularized.

Christianity, then, was preached to begin with by a handful of men, most of them very simple men. True, the Holy Spirit dwelt in them but who was aware of this? In slightly more than three centuries Christianity had succeeded in taking root throughout the Roman Empire. Bossuet considered this was the result of miracles greater even than those that accompanied the preaching of Jesus Christ. Miracles are God's business and beyond our grasp, but the historian may legitimately examine the human means used by the divine power to bring them about, in a word, the play of secondary causes.

One of these appears in the Jewish communities which provided the apostles with their first audiences. Side by side with the resident Hebrews, there were, as the Acts tell us, Greeks, that is, Hebrews who came from abroad and were not Palestinians. They were in many cases people of importance enjoying a kind of monopoly in the economic life of the Empire. The Diaspora had scattered them abroad. But Rome had granted them a privileged status which allowed them the free

practice of their religion. Strabo, who died in 25 B.C., said that it would have been difficult to find a place "where this people had not been welcomed". Their professional activities made those who became converts valuable propagators of the faith. We might even say that they put Catholicism "on the map", and all the more successfully because they were in the main incomparable apostles.

In any case, the characteristic mark of the early Church was the apostolic zeal of its converts, whether of Jewish or pagan origin, patricians or members of the lower classes (and these were by far the most numerous). Pagan writers whose evidence cannot be gainsaid provide us with this information. Celsus is one example with his description of what he had seen in Roman families. He despised the Christians both because of their inferior social status and because they could neither read nor write, and he shows them insinuating themselves into the patrician families to do their work of conversion:

> As soon as they can take to one side the children or a few women as senseless as themselves, they begin to exhibit their wonderful wares. They are the only people worth believing. The father of the family and its teachers are gasbags, dunderheads, unable either to know what is good or to achieve it. [The bolder spirits do not hesitate to egg the children on to rebellion. They are to cast off their masters as soon as they can and listen to the good news] in the wool carder's, the cobbler's and the launderer's work places. There they will learn perfect wisdom. This is the way the Christians set about gaining converts.

The work of conversion was confined to one spot in the case of some while for others it was done from place to place as is made clear in the following passage from Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*:

> They [the converts] began by following the Saviour's advice and distributing their goods to the poor. Then leaving their country behind them, they went forth to fulfil their mission as evangelists, their ambition to preach the word of faith to those who had as yet heard nothing of it, and to hand on the books

of the divine Gospels. They were content to lay the foundations of the faith among foreign peoples and then established other pastors there, and to these they gave the task of nourishing those they had brought to the faith. Having done so, they went on to other lands and other nations by the grace and with the help of God.

The majority of these itinerant preachers have remained nameless, like all the saints whom the Church glorifies on the first of November. Yet a few are known to us: Timothy, son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father and the best loved of St Paul's companions; Titus, a Greek whom the great apostle made responsible for the collection at Corinth on behalf of the "saints" in Macedonia; Lucian, a Roman priest who exercised his zealous apostolate in the Beauvais district. It is believed that Diocletian ordered him to be beheaded about the year 290. Then there is St Sebastian, a soldier, who had chosen a military career so that he might help persecuted Christians without exciting suspicion. Diocletian tolerated him for a long time because of his eminent professional qualities, but then, exasperated by his ardent faith, ordered him to be beaten to death. We may also mention St Hilary who fought against the Arian heresy far beyond the limits of his own diocese. And there are so many more we could name!

Christianity made its first appearance as it was propagated along the Roman roads by missionaries or simply by converts of various types, soldiers, civil servants, merchants in the convoys sent out by the Roman power. The effort at evangelization during the first half of the third century was confined to the Provincia Narbonensis and the north-eastern region crossed by the roads which went from Lyons towards Paris, Rheims and Trier. The latter city was the most important administrative and military centre on the boundary of the *limes*. On the other hand, the western area from the Pyrenees to the North Sea was neglected for the time being. As Canon Griffe points out in his book *La Gaule chrétienne à l'époque romaine* (Toulouse, 1947), bishops "from Rome or elsewhere" naturally

did their work in the districts that were most romanized "or at least where the Roman or Eastern element was most in evidence". Meanwhile, therefore, there was no question of a native episcopate. Trier had a bishop as early as the third century, says Canon Griffe. The date of the earliest known bishop of Autun, Reticius, is 313, but he probably had one or even several predecessors.

Opinions vary as to the number of bishops in Gaul during the fourth century. The more prudent scholars give thirty-four as the figure for the year 346. In any case, at about this time the network of dioceses was fairly close-knit and Christianity was sufficiently rooted in the towns to allow a beginning to be made in the evangelization of the country districts.

This new apostolate found itself up against a different kind of paganism from that of the towns. It arose from and was sustained by the hopes and fears awakened in the peasant mind by the elements of water, fire, earth and heaven, and it was part and parcel of every act in men's lives and hence all the more difficult to eradicate. St Martin waged a successful war against it. The *Life* by Sulpicius Severus, which Fr Monceaux considered to be "a historical document", gives us an idea of what the apostolic "rounds" of the bishop of Tours were like. In the story of the destruction of a sacred tree we see him at work, not alone but surrounded by monks, in a township where stood a very ancient temple. St Martin was able to have it demolished without encountering any opposition. But when he ordered the sacred pine tree to be felled, a clamour arose and all his efforts to convince the peasants that a tree-trunk could have nothing divine about it were of no avail.

A pagan then ventured to say: "If you have any confidence in the God you say you adore, we will cut down this tree ourselves, only on condition that you stand underneath it when it falls. If your Lord is with you as you claim he is, you will escape." St Martin allowed himself to be put where the people wanted him to be. Just as the pine was about to crush him, he lifted his hand and the tree "was hurled back as though by the

force of a whirlwind" and fell on the opposite side so that "the peasants who thought they were safe" only just avoided being ground to powder. A great cry rose heavenwards, continues Sulpicius Severus, the pagans were dumbfounded, the monks wept for joy. So great was the shock that there was scarcely anyone "unwilling to abandon the errors of impiety".

Several details are worth nothing in this episode. First of all the failure of the bishop when he tried to make his audience understand that a tree-trunk could not possess any divine attributes. Nothing however justifies us in thinking that he found it difficult to preach a doctrinal sermon. Sulpicius Severus is anxious, on the contrary, to assure us, as against certain ill-intentioned contemporaries of his, that St Martin's words were "full of learning" and his eloquence generous and pure. He adds: "Doubtless this is a tribute of little value when we think of St Martin's virtues, but the amazing thing is that this particular merit should have been found in an unlettered man." But as far as the rude and superstitious audience to whom he was speaking was concerned, his arguments were far less effective than the manifestations of power. Hence the change of attitude that took place when they saw the pine move away from the bishop and threaten themselves.

The characteristic mark of St Martin's apostolate was the abundance of miraculous gifts with which he was favoured, still more the understanding love he showed towards the peasants. It caused him to limit to the strictly necessary minimum the sacrifices he demanded of them and the renunciations he imposed. Once they had become believers, what point was there in causing them pain or in humiliating them? Hence St Martin did not hesitate to have a church built near the spring or the clearing which had formerly been venerated and to which their pagan fathers and they themselves had come. There was nothing to stop them returning to it on the days on which they had been accustomed to visit it since Christianity had taken the place of paganism in their minds and at the very places where they had been in the habit of meeting.

Outside the Empire and long before its dissolution, Christian communities had been established during the first four centuries of the Christian era and almost exclusively in Asia.

The boundary of the Empire at the end of the second century followed the upper basin of the Tigris and rejoined the Euphrates in the middle of its course and so included northwestern Mesopotamia. These Aramean lands gave a hearty welcome to Christianity. In about the year 200, the kingdom of Osrhoene, whose capital was Edessa, became Christian. Soon after, the reformed and militant Mazdean religion set up a vigorous resistance but was unable to prevent Christianity reaching Ctesiphon on the Tigris and from establishing outposts as far as the Persian Gulf by the end of the fourth century, and even in peninsular India where it is said to have been introduced by St Thomas.

In Armenia about the year 300, a solitary apostle, Gregory the Illuminator, converted Tiridates II. The aristocracy and the common people followed the example of their sovereign. Soon after, thanks to the learned monk Mesrob, Armenia had a translation of the Bible in its own dialect and even obtained its own liturgy.

In Georgia, a slave woman of unknown nationality who is called by her Christian name alone, Nina (*cristiana*), seems to have played a part similar to that of Clotilda among the Franks. Her reputation as a miracle worker, founded on several amazing cures, came to the ears of the queen who was wasting away because of a mysterious disease. She called her to her bedside but Nina refused to come. The queen came to her and was healed. She and Mirian the king offered her presents which she refused saying: "The only thing that can bring me pleasure is for you and the king to accept the Christian religion." The queen was converted but the king delayed his own decision until, threatened by death while hunting, he promised like Clovis at Tolbiac to be baptized if he were spared.

Ulfilas, well known for his translation of the New Testament into the Gothic dialect, converted the Goths who had settled

in the Dobrudja along the lower Danube. Later, several of his disciples fell into Arianism and introduced it to the West during their mass invasion.

Catholicism spread to the south of the Iranian Empire through the Syrian desert to the tribes of queen Mawia who were evangelized by the monk Moses in the reign of the emperor Valens, and in the following century to certain tribes of the Yemen.

None of these solitary apostles had turned his attention to Abyssinia but eventually two Tyrians were taken by force to that country. Their names were Frumentius and Edesius. The Ethiopians had massacred the whole crew of the ship that had brought them to Africa and they were the sole survivors. They had been spared on account of their youth and innocence. Their captors offered them to the king at Axum. He made Edesius his butler and Frumentius his treasurer. After the king's death Frumentius went to St Athanasius and begged him to appoint a bishop in Abyssinia. The patriarch of Alexandria replied: "Who is more full of the Holy Spirit than you yourself? Who is more suited to undertake this responsibility?" Frumentius received episcopal consecration, returned to Ethiopia and established Christianity there.

Gregory the Illuminator, Nina, Frumentius, Moses, Ulfilas were all solitary apostles. The first four based their apostolate on the conversion of the sovereign. All were foreigners in the countries they christianized. Some had been taken to these places by force and all, at least to begin with, acted without any mandate. In this respect they illustrate the essentially missionary character of the early Church. These converts—and we may learn a lesson from them—regulated their behaviour and their whole life in accordance with the words of the Psalm, "because I have believed, I have spoken", and this even when there was grave danger in so doing.

Ireland, the only Western country outside the boundaries of the Empire to receive the Gospel, was evangelized by a man of the same type and the same fervour as the others. Patrick too

was a solitary apostle and a "displaced person". About the year 405, Scots pirates (the Irish were called Scots at the time) during a raid on the south-west coast of Britain had captured him and then sold him as a slave in Ireland where for a time he was a shepherd. Patrick had been brought up a Catholic. After six years of slavery, he managed to escape and crossed to the Continent. The trial he had endured had revived his somewhat lukewarm faith and he went to make a retreat at Lérins after which he returned to his native land.

But it was Ireland he wanted to evangelize. Before going there, he crossed the Channel once more and asked the bishop of Auxerre for the diaconate. Meanwhile Palladius, the bishop sent by Pope Celestine to the Scots, had died. It is not even certain that he ever reached Ireland. Patrick, after consecration by St Germanus of Auxerre, was appointed to succeed Palladius (432).

Thus began one of the most extraordinary missions of that time, even if we confine ourselves to authenticated facts and leave to one side the mass of legendary episodes. The Irish, under the influence of abundant charismatic gifts comparable to those enjoyed by St Martin, renounced the druids and their ceremonies just as the peasants of Touraine had forsaken their idols.

After some ten years devoted to this miraculous apostolate, Patrick returned for the third time to the Continent which had been everywhere overrun by the barbarians during the preceding half-century. He had evidently in no sense abandoned—or so it would seem—the pressing urge to move about from place to place that apparently possessed the clerics of that time. True, Patrick's goal was Rome and his intention, a wholly spiritual one, was to strengthen the ties between the Christian communities of Ireland and the papacy. On his return he established his episcopal see at Armagh about the year 444. During the remaining ten years of his life he was to complete the conversion of Ireland and make it "the island of saints".

The Church of Ireland is peculiar in the sense that it

developed in a country that had not been colonized by Rome. For the first time in the West, Catholicism had come into direct contact with a religion with customs and institutions that owed nothing to the Graeco-Roman civilization which so many considered the most favourable environment for the establishment of Catholicism. And it had won a complete victory. The first mission to Ireland therefore developed in surroundings comparable to those which were to be encountered by modern missions. This is only a detail and should not make us forget the common and essential characteristic of all the Christian communities during the first few centuries. In Ireland, as elsewhere, their founders all hastened to place them in the charge of bishops.

The propagation of the Gospel, Mgr Batiffol has written, was "a multiplication of Churches analogous to a proliferation of cells". And their proliferation took place for the most part without any intervention on the part of Rome—another characteristic of the early Churches. When the barbarians were evangelized during the following period, missionaries in our sense of the word were to appear on the scene, missionaries, that is, who were envoys of the papacy.