CHAPTER I

THE MISSION OF THE APOSTLES

The history of the Missions began when that of Christ in his human nature was about to end. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles make it possible for us to retrace the wonderful circumstances in which this memorable moment was set.

Christ was in the Upper Room with his disciples for the last time. How dull their minds still were! He had foretold his death, resurrection and return to the Father time after time, yet some of them took him for a spirit! How patiently he led them towards the truth! "Look at my hands and my feet, to be assured that it is myself; touch me, and look; a spirit has not flesh and bones, as you see that I have." But this was not enough. Their real joy at seeing him again was still mingled with amazement and a certain amount of incredulity. Then he asked them: "Have you anything here to eat?"

They gave him a piece of grilled fish and he ate it in their presence. Now they no longer thought they were dealing with a spirit. Yet they had not abandoned the earthly hopes of Judaism and they asked him:

> Lord, dost thou mean to restore the dominion to Israel here and now? But he told them, It is not for you to know the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. Enough for you, that the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will receive strength from him; you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout Judaea, in Samaria, yes, *and to the ends of the earth.*
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> (Acts 1. 6–8.)

He did not expect them to rest but to undertake an immense task. To prevent discouragement in these simple men, alone in the world, who had received the command to spread a new religion whose commandments were radically opposed to those of the ancient religions, Christ foretold that he would be there to help them: "And behold I am with you all through the days that are coming, until the consummation of the world.... I am sending down upon you the gift which was promised by my Father; you must wait in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high."

He then took them to the outskirts of Bethany and there, as he blessed them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. St Luke adds that they returned full of a great joy to Jerusalem.

There are two points to note in this scene: the divine promise of continual help and the universal character of the religion they have been commanded to preach. The promise was fulfilled ten days later at Pentecost with all the startling force that was needed for the apostles to be certain of its origin: they were all gathered together in unity of purpose. All at once a sound came from heaven like that of a strong wind blowing, and filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then appeared to them what seemed to be tongues of fire, which parted and came to rest on each of them. (Acts 2. 2–4.)

Wind and fire are the signs of the divine presence in biblical tradition.

> Among those who were dwelling in Jerusalem at this time were devout Jews from every country under heaven.... And they were all beside themselves with astonishment; Are they not all Galileans speaking? they asked.... There are Parthians among us, and Medes and Elamites; our homes are in Mesopotamia, or Judaea, or Cappadocia; in Pontus or Asia, Phrygia or Pamphylia, Egypt or the parts of Libya round Cyrene... and each has been hearing them tell of God's wonders in his own language.
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> (Acts 2. 5–12.)

They were beside themselves with amazement and did not know what to think. Some treated the whole affair as a joke. Peter then reminded them that the prophets had foretold the resurrection of Christ whom the Jews had recently crucified:

> God, then, has raised up this man, Jesus, from the dead.... And now, exalted at God's right hand, he has claimed from his Father his promise to bestow the Holy Spirit; and he has poured out that Spirit, as you can see and hear for yourselves.
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> [Profoundly moved, they asked the Apostles:] What must we do? Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to have your sins forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and for your children, and for all those, however far away, whom the Lord our God calls to himself.
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> (Acts 2. 37–40.)

We learn from the Acts that some three thousand persons heeded these words. This first nucleus of converts appears to have increased rapidly. It was composed of Israelites and Greeks, that is, Hebrews from abroad as distinct from those living in Palestine.

These first Christians sold their property and used the money they received for it to provide for the upkeep of the communities formed among themselves. The Acts also tell us that their numbers increased every day and all the more so because "so many were the wonders and signs performed by the apostles in Jerusalem".

Since the cure of the lame man at the Gate Beautiful, who at the command of St Peter and in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, had stood up and walked, since Peter again, after denouncing the hypocrisy and the sacrilegious theft of Ananias and Sapphira, had caused them both to fall dead at his feet, no one had dared to question the extraordinary power of the apostles. At Jerusalem people went so far as

> to bring sick folk into the streets, and lay them down there on beds and pallets, in the hope that even the shadow of Peter might fall upon one of them here and there, as he passed by, and so they

would be healed of their infirmities. From neighbouring cities, too, the common people flocked to Jerusalem, bringing with them the sick and those who were troubled by unclean spirits; and all of them were cured.

(Acts 5. 15–16.)

These manifestations of the Spirit exasperated the members of the Synagogue. A violent persecution of the infant Church broke out. But it proved to be to its advantage when the punishment and the conversion of Saul, its chief persecutor, had given startling proof that the Spirit, as Christ had foretold, did not cease to protect it.

After Paul's first preaching at Damascus and Iconium, the Church was still composed only of Hebrews and of Greeks. We must realize, and we can never do so sufficiently, how essential it is that the Spirit should cure the egoism and the narrow-mindedness of men. At first the apostles, Jewish in origin, thought they would confine Christ's teaching to men of their own race. Before they consented to share it with the Gentiles, it was necessary for the Spirit to manifest himself to the centurion Cornelius. The angel said to the centurion:

(God) would have thee send men to Joppa, to bring here one Simon, who is called Peter ... thou wilt learn from him what thou hast to do. [Cornelius obeyed at once and whilst his messengers were on their way to Joppa, Peter saw the heavens open and] a bundle, like a great sheet ... in it were all kinds of four-footed beasts, and things that creep on the earth, and all the birds of heaven. And a voice came to him, Rise up, Peter, lay about thee and eat. It cannot be, Lord, answered Peter; never in my life have I eaten anything unclean. Then the voice came to him a second time, It is not for thee to call anything profane, which God has made clean. Peter was still puzzling in his mind over the meaning of his vision, when Cornelius' messengers ... were seen standing at the gate ... he set out with them.... And as soon as Peter had entered ... You know well enough, he told them, that a Jew is contaminated if he consorts with one of another race, or visits him; but God has been shewing me that we ought not to speak of any man as profane or unclean.

The light was beginning to dawn on Peter. Suddenly, just as he was bringing his explanation of Christ's doctrine to a close, the Holy Spirit conferred the gift of tongues on the Gentiles, that is, on Cornelius and those who were with him. When he saw this renewal of Pentecost, Peter cried out: "Who will grudge us the water for baptizing these men, that have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?"

The Jerusalem Jews were still hesitant, but when Peter had told them what had taken place in the house of Cornelius at Caesarea, they too were full of wonder that redemption was not a treasure intended for them alone.

The call that came to Peter at Joppa had given the signal for that evangelization of the world whose early stages are revealed to us in the Acts of the Apostles. As soon as Paul arrived in a city for the first time, he went to the synagogue. At Antioch in Pisidia, at Iconium, Thessalonica, Philippi and Corinth, his first audiences were Jews engaged in commerce or victims of deportation orders. But many of them remained ardent adherents of the old Judaism and refused to believe in Christ, the universal Redeemer. When they uttered blasphemies in reply to Paul's teaching as he preached the universal character of the new religion, the Apostle replied: "We were bound to preach God's words to you first; but now, since you reject it, since you declare yourselves unfit for eternal life, be it so; we will turn our thoughts to the Gentiles."

These words which were accompanied by striking charismatic manifestations unleashed their wrath. During his first journey to Iconium where a great number of Jews and Greeks were converted, Paul and Barnabas, manhandled and threatened with stoning, had to take refuge at Lystra. Jews from Iconium and Antioch followed them there and, in the course of a riot, Paul was stoned and left for dead outside the city. At Philippi he and Silas were handed over to the praetors, beaten with rods and thrown into prison. The same fate befell them at Thessalonica and Berea.

At Jerusalem on his return from his third journey, some

fanatical Jews took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. When the tribune heard of this plot, he gave orders that the Apostle was to be taken to Caesarea, where he was put in prison. He was still in captivity two years later when a new procurator arrived in the person of Festus before whom he claimed his rights as a Roman citizen. This appeal to Caesar was to bring him to Rome. Shortly after he had set sail, a violent storm wrecked the ship at Malta, where the survivors received a friendly welcome.

After spending three of the winter months on the island, Paul took to sea again, stayed three days at Syracuse, a week at Puteoli among brethren, that is, among those who had accepted the new doctrine, and then set out for Rome. There were already Christian converts in the city. They had doubtless come from oriental communities and, urged on by that ardent desire to make converts which possessed the early Christians, had spontaneously become apostles. As the Acts tell us, these brethren of Rome came as far as the forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet Paul. When he saw them, he gave thanks to God and went forward with renewed courage.

The Jewish community in Rome proved to be as divided as those of Greece and the Orient. On the one hand were those who enthusiastically embraced the new religion, on the other, the obdurate adherents of the old law. Yet the art of convincing people could hardly have been carried further than it was by St Paul. Whether he was speaking to Romans, Corinthians or Galatians, he always began by insisting that he himself was of no importance. He stood to one side: "Paul, an apostle not holding his commision from men, not appointed by man's means, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father. . . ."

As the majority of his hearers were Jews, he quoted the prophets whose writings he knew as well as did the best of the rabbis. Thus, having quoted Joel ("Every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved"), he made clear by means of a series of deductions the need for his own preaching. Only, how are they to call upon him until they have learned to

believe in him? And how are they to believe in him, until they listen to him. And how can they listen, without a preacher to listen to? And how can there be preachers, unless preachers are sent on their errand? (Rom. 10. 14–15.) All this clear series of arguments leads to the magnificent image taken from Isaias: "How welcome is the coming of those who tell of peace, who tell of good news."

This good news is for all men; "I have the same duty to all, Greek and barbarian, learned and simple; ... There is no distinction made here between Jew and Gentile; all alike have one Lord, and he has enough and to spare for all those who call upon him."

In any case, the Old Testament had already foretold this universalism. Isaias had said: "Those who never looked for me have found me; I have made myself known to those who never asked for word of me." This means that the incredulity of a section of the Jewish people gained salvation for the Gentiles. But the divine mercy remains full and entire. If St Paul recalls the blindness of the "people that refuses obedience and cries out against me", to whom God had stretched out his hands "all day", it is not so much to humiliate them as to emphasize the extraordinary importance and the outstanding value their conversion would have. "Why then, if their false step has enriched the world, if the Gentiles have been enriched by their default, what must we expect, when it is made good?" (Rom. 11. 12.)

It is to St Paul that we owe the finest of all panegyrics of charity.

> Charity is patient, is kind; charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent; has no selfish aims, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices at the victory of truth; sustains, believes, hopes, endures, to the last.... Meanwhile, faith, hope and charity persist, all three; but the greatest of them all is charity.
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> (1 Cor. 13. 4–13.)

Charity, that "bond of perfection" as he calls it elsewhere, was at the heart of his apostolic life. If we find it astonishing that nothing, prison, maltreatment, tortures, continual travel, privations, could destroy his body, so ill-endowed physically, we must remember that he has told us in one short but striking phrase all that he owed to prayer: "Though the outward part of our nature is being worn down, our inner life is refreshed from day to day." The apostolate of St Paul, erudite, based on a wide knowledge of the texts, yet free from pedantry, subtle yet without affectation, fatherly, even familiar on occasion, overflowing with love yet always firm, is one of the finest examples of what can be achieved by the intellect when enlightened by faith and by the love of men for God's sake.

It is doubtful whether he went from Rome to Spain as he intended to do, but he certainly returned to the East. During the years 65–7, he stayed in Crete, at Ephesus and finally in Macedonia where it is believed he was again arrested and taken to Rome in the year 68. The Christians, on whom Nero had laid the blame for the burning of the city (64) to divert from himself the probably well-founded suspicion that it was he who was responsible for it, were harassed at Rome with sadistic ferocity. According to Tacitus "a vast multitude was thrown into prison". Some of the prisoners came from distant provinces as was the case with St Peter and St Paul, but the majority had been rounded up on the spot, whence we may infer that the Christian community in Rome was already of considerable size.

The cruel nature of the punishment inflicted on the Christians had its effect on this community. St Paul's last days were darkened by apostasies and defections, news of which reached him in gaol. He was aware that the time was near when he would have to bear witness to Christ whom he had preached so learnedly and so lovingly. He wrote to Timothy:

> As for me, my blood already flows in sacrifice; the time has nearly come when I can go free. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have redeemed my pledge; I look for-

ward to the prize that is waiting for me, the prize I have earned. The Lord . . . will grant it to me when that day comes; to me, yes, and all those who have learned to welcome his appearing.

As he enjoyed the *jus civitatis*, he had no torture to undergo. He was slain by the sword on the spot where, according to tradition, St Paul's-outside-the-Walls now stands.

St Peter, a poor lower-class Jew, had no such privilege. He was condemned to crucifixion but, according to an ancient tradition, considered himself unworthy of the same death as his master and asked to be crucified upside down.

Persecutions did not stop the progress of Christianity even among the upper classes which it had hitherto scarcely reached. We learn from Dion Cassius, author of a Roman History written in Greek, that the "consularis" Acilius Glabrio, Flavius Clemens, who was a consul in office at the time and a near relation of the Emperor, together with his wife Domitilla and other senators, were all accused of being "supporters of novelties", and suffered under Domitian's edicts.

St John had been exiled to Patmos by Domitian. After the Emperor's death, he returned to Ephesus. He was nearly ninety years old but showed no signs of decline. His Gospel and his three Epistles, overflowing with charity, date from this time. He continued to direct all the Christian communities of Asia, visited the provinces bordering on Ephesus either to consecrate bishops there or to establish new Churches as St Paul had previously done. The communities were to be linked to Christ through their bishops. "Christ comes from God", wrote St Clement of Rome, "the apostles come from Christ and it is they who, experiencing the first fruits of the Spirit, instituted certain men as bishops."

This programme seems to have been quickly implemented in the East. From the end of the second century, a number of cities in Asia Minor: Jerusalem, Joppa (now Jaffa), Caesarea, Tyre, Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum; in Greece, Corinth and Thessalonica; in Africa, Alexandria and Cyrene; among the islands, Cyprus and Crete,

all had organized Churches, governed by *episcopoi* and presbyters. In the West, we find scarcely any besides Rome and Puteoli. And both of these were the work of apostles from the East, so true is it that it was from the Christian East that the West was to receive in its turn the word of Christ. Yet we have no equivalent of the admirable source book which is the Acts of the Apostles to provide us with information on its diffusion throughout what was to become Europe.