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* *Knights of Malta* *

Chancellor's Update

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History Repeats itself ...

Over the years people have heard that History repeats itself except for the names, dates and places. In the not too distant past students of history, when studying the decline of the Roman Empire, often noticed similarities in their contemporary culture. Discouraged apathy, little resistance to the barbarian invaders, disintegration of culture and the old pagan religion, decay of the city community, disappearance of the city's gods and loyalty to the city, feeble imitation of past art, and mediocre Latin literature were representative of the Roman decline. Gradual fusion was taking place by accepting the new situation as permanent and legal, and accommodating both groups in legal systems and popular customs. How did Christianity fare during this period? In a book entitled The Church in the Dark Ages, Volume I, pp. 319-325, published in 1950, French Author, Henri Daniel-Rops, Church historian, studied this era.

The historical period which begins around the year 400 and which is to last for roughly six hundred years, is certainly one of the most painful that Christianity has ever known, even up to modern times. It was a night in which humanity seemed to be groping blindly amid the bloody confusion of today and the anguish of the morrow. Only the Church, guided by a transcendent ambition, pursued her course unwaveringly, and in working to her own supernatural ends she became the most effective means of ensuring the salvation of civilization. Considered in the mass, the Christians of the time, who were like us, just ordinary, humble wretches, were very far from giving this impression of shining righteousness; on the contrary, we see them, reeling beneath the blows fate deals them, and sinking ever deeper into the darkness.

The baptized society no longer possessed the vigor and the purity of that of the heroic period of the persecutions. Long-standing habit, that evil force making for disintegration, had already considerably eaten away its faith and relaxed its morals. As Christianity penetrated deeper into pagan society it became more and more hard put to it to preserve itself from contamination by that society. The Fathers of the period often point an avenging finger at those baptized Christians who live in an entirely pagan fashion. According to St Augustine they held drinking orgies and committed debaucheries under pretext of doing honor to the festival of a martyr; according to St John Chrysostom they left the churches empty on the days of the games in order to rush to watch the bloody spectacles in the arena. This moral decadence, which eventually brought about the disintegration of the Empire, had not left the adherents of the new faith unscathed. 'I have heard tell from our fathers,' Chrysostom goes on to say, 'that there were indeed real Christians once upon a time-during the persecutions!'

The principal facts of the faith were surely beyond dispute, but various singular pagan infiltrations were obvious within it. How many families still preserved pagan statues carefully hidden away?

Finally - and in a sense this was even more serious - Christian society had been caught up in the irresistible current of intellectual decadence which dominated the final centuries of the Roman Empire. Of course, the

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last classical writers of any note were Christians, Fathers of the Church, a St Ambrose or a St Augustine: but it must be freely admitted that their culture is clearly inferior by comparison with that of the masters of the Golden Age of Latin literature. They knew only one or two of the classical writers thoroughly: St Ambrose, for example, knew his Cicero and his Virgil, and that was all.

Thus, three serious dangers threatened Roman society about 400. It was a society which was largely baptized, but baptism had clearly, been unable to deliver it either from its human miseries or from its historic fates. The three dangers were: moral decadence, contamination of the faith, and the decline of culture. The state of 'Barbarism' is by no means simply the lot of the hordes who were awaiting their hour to attack a 'civilized' world. There was a kind of necessary relationship, a mysterious bond. By the fourth century the Roman world, including the majority of the baptized, was ready to let itself be swiftly barbarized.

The invaders did not continue to remain savage occupiers, holding themselves aloof from the vanquished. From the middle of the sixth century onwards the fusion between victors and vanquished was taking place everywhere. A conversion which was often rapid and superficial, obtained by means which were political rather than religious, could not transform men's souls outright. For the time being, in decisively breaking down the barriers between the two ethnic elements, the Church's influence actually contributed to barbarization. The principal fact for the historian considering the West after the Invasions is, therefore, the appalling decline in civilization. The Roman world of Theodosius - already worm eaten and decadent - was replaced by the tangled mass of bloody chaos.

How did this drift into darkness take place? The direct influence of the Germans marked a retreat for the civilization based on the city in favor of that based on the tribe; this direct influence is particularly obvious in the changes which took place in the law. The indirect influence of the Invasions disorganized the provinces of the Empire, made the highways unsafe, paralyzed production and commerce, and started the decline of the towns. Men lived in distress and in fear of the morrow; as in all epochs of great historic upheaval, violence and cruelty fed on the situation, and social disorder resulted in an increase in crime. The intermingling of the two ethnic elements resulted in an appalling lowering of moral standards.

The men of the time were perfectly aware that civilization was collapsing. They saw society falling apart before their eyes, like the imposing Roman aqueducts which they could watch crumbling to pieces, arch upon arch, through lack of maintenance, till only the upright columns remained. There is not a single one of these witnesses, who does not protest against this shocking debasement of moral values. 'Woe to our epoch!' declares Gregory of Tours, 'for the study of the humanities is dead!' During the three centuries of gigantic turmoil, the Church's action seemed almost superficial and its grip upon men's souls extremely feeble. But because her monks were praying, because her bishops were working, because her saints were living their model lives, the Church remained the only civilizing force of the age, the only hope which the light still possessed of vanquishing the darkness in the far-distant future.

As seen above, our civilization is crumbling. It can only be saved by the Church's living the Faith.

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