

CHAPTER III.

THE WEST.—THE CATACOMBS.

THE sacred vine of Christianity already flourished in Asia so as to extend its branches over a multitude of nations;* but it did not take root so quickly in the West. Rome, thoroughly idolatrous—Rome, drunk with the blood of martyrs, which she shed like water—Rome protected polytheism with all her power, and her power extended over an entire world! In the east, a mysterious sign, which made Satan tremble in the depth of the fiery abyss, announced that the kingdom of God was near; but in Italy, and the regions beyond the Alps, Christianity was, as yet, in the condition of a secret society; people were received into its ranks with all manner of caution and even mystery; its members recognized each other by certain signs; and, doubtless, the sign of the cross, the origin of which is unknown, was one of those mysterious signs, which revealed an unknown Christian to his brethren scattered through the crowd. It was not that the Christians were so few in the regions of the West; they were already sufficiently numerous to form armies; but persecuted by idolatrous governors, tracked like wild beasts, and finding no protection in the Roman laws, which recognized only to punish them, they lived isolated *as drops upon the grass, as a dew from the Lord, which waiteth not for man, nor tarrieth for the children of men.*†

The first Latin churches were domestic chapels, and the first altars, portable wooden chests like the Ark, having the same form and the same iron rings.‡ Those primitive churches of Rome, which were

* We learn from Arnobius and Eusebius that the Gospel, during the three first centuries, had spread far beyond the limits of the Roman empire, amongst the Persians, the Parthians, the Seythians, and many other nations whom they do not name. (Arnob., *Adv. Gentes*, lib. ii. ch. 12.—Euseb., *Demonst. Evang.* l. iii. ch. 5.)

† Micah, ch. v., v. 7.

‡ One of these altars, whereon St. Peter was thought to have celebrated the divine mysteries, and which Pope St. Sylvester inclosed under the high altar of St. John of Lateran, was examined on the 29th of March, 1658, under Alexander VII., by the Cavalier Baromini, in concert with the chief sacristan of the church; it is four palms