

tained by them, that so the church might be enabled to relieve those, who were not only widows, but destitute of any means of support.

52. The murmurings of the Hellenist Jews convinced the apostles that the funds which had hitherto been distributed by themselves, should be committed to other hands. Seven men denominated *Deacons*, were accordingly chosen by the multitude, and solemnly ordained by the apostles, who being thus freed from all cares of a temporal nature, gave themselves wholly to the ministry of the word. The corruptions of succeeding ages inverted the order thus established by the followers of our Lord; for, the superior clergy, who spared no pains to prove themselves the legitimate successors of the apostles, instead of imitating their example, devoted their attention wholly to the preservation, or increase of their *wealth*; while the preaching of the gospel, as a matter of trivial importance, and beneath the dignity of their order, was devolved wholly upon the inferior clergy.

53. During the first and second centuries, the clergy and poor were maintained solely by the offerings of the people, and these were administered entirely by the deacons. At the suggestion of St. Paul, the churches of Macedonia, Achaia, Galatia, and Corinth, had contributed during the apostolic age to the necessities of their Christian brethren in Judea. An example so excellent was zealously imitated during several ages, by the believers: the poverty of some churches was amply supplied by the munificent liberality of others; and, in times when the necessities of life formed the only bounds to charity, the voluntary contributions of the faithful furnished of themselves a fund, amply sufficient both for the relief of the poor, and the comfortable, if not the splendid support of the ministers. It could not be difficult to provide for the maintenance of men, much more concerned for the success of the gospel, than for their own aggrandizement.

54. So great, however, from the oblations of the people alone, had become the wealth of the church, that, after the year 220, more than one persecution originated in the desire of plunder, which it excited: nor has Father Paul scrupled to ascribe almost all the persecutions which followed the death of Commodus, to the same cause. "The things that happened aforetime, happened for our learning," and from the example before us, as well as from those afterwards produced by a similar cause, we may draw the following conclusion, that excessive wealth has always been detrimental to the church: it has either supplied her enemies with a motive for persecution, or, which is a much more serious evil, it has sown the seeds of every species of internal corruption.

55. As the wealth of the church, that is, of the clergy, for these came soon to be identified, increased, the latter, who had hitherto lived in common, chose to have each his separate maintenance; while the bishops, whose authority had gradually though imperceptibly increased, made no scruple to appropriate the sums which ought to have been applied to the support of the poor. Nay, so abandoned had this order become, that in the time of Cyprian, not a few of its members defiled their hands with the abominable practice of usury. These, be it remarked, were corruptions which originated and increased under the *Voluntary system*.

56. As yet, however, the church had acquired no *immoveable estates*. To account for this, recourse has been had to the belief, entertained by the early Christians, concerning the speedy termination of the world: "which belief," it is said, "had rendered them regardless of temporal things." It seems, we would object, as unreasonable, that, persons, under such an apprehension as that stated, should evince so

shameful an anxiety about perishable riches, as the conduct of the bishops appears to imply. We must recur, therefore, to the Roman law, by which no person was permitted "to give, or bequeath by will, *real estates*, to any college, society, or corporation, nor these to accept them, without the approbation of the senate."

57. The anarchy, which succeeded the imprisonment of Valerian, afforded to the faithful in the west the first opportunity of signalizing their zeal, and by transgressing the law—which, during that period might be done with impunity—of conferring *immoveable estates* upon the Church. These, confiscated—except in Gaul—by Dioclesian and Maximian, A. D. 302, were, eight years after, restored by Maxentius, and confirmed by the edicts of Constantine and his colleague Licinius; the latter of whom, by granting a *special privilege*, or exemption from the laws regarding corporate bodies, rendered the church capable of acquiring *immoveable estates*, and fixed revenues. This, therefore, forms a most important era in the history of ecclesiastical wealth. It will still be observed, that all this was in accordance with the voluntary principle. The emperors merely confirmed to the church the possession of its own estates.

58. To the edicts by which her estates were confirmed in the possession of the church, was added another, exempting the clergy, not only from personal service, but even from the payment of the public taxes. This proved, in succeeding times, a most fruitful source of ecclesiastical wealth: for, instead of *holding of the crown*, in which case their property was liable to the payment of all public burdens, those who possessed estates chose to *hold of the church*, by which means they were totally exempted from taxes; while through the failure of male heirs, or the occurrence of any other circumstances, in the management of which, practice had rendered churchmen wonderfully expert, the estates recurred to the church.

59. A law, made in the year 370, by which "the clergy and their agents," are forbidden "to frequent the houses of widows and minors," indicates the shameful and ungenerous use they had made of the influence, which their profession gave them, with the weak and wealthy. This law, having been found insufficient to restrain ecclesiastical cupidity, was followed by another, which ordained that "widows, who devoted themselves to the church, should neither give nor bequeath *immoveable* or *real estates* to it, nor even *moveables* of great value."

60. "*Crescit amor nummi, quantum ipsa pecunia crescit.*" Never did the proverb receive a more melancholy illustration than in the case before us. Prohibited from hunting after the estates of women and children, the clergy turned their attention to the improvement of those which they already possessed. For this purpose, the rents were carefully hoarded, with the intention, not of relieving the poor, but of purchasing additional estates. This practice, as well as that of disinheriting the proper heirs for the *benefit*—so they called it—of the church, is mentioned and reprobated by St. Augustine; and the abuse, which he condemned in his writings, he was careful to avoid; for he had the virtue to refuse all gifts made to his own church, at the expense of the donor's relatives.

61. The management of the ecclesiastical wealth was, till the year 420, committed to the deacons, by whom, under the inspection of the bishop and his college of priests, the fund, arising from alms, rents of estates, &c., was distributed. The maintenance of three thousand poor, or the relief of ten thousand persons in one day, may impart some idea of the riches, to which, before the expiration of four centuries, the church had attained.