

whatever may be the materials of the slab, the legs are too slender to be of anything but wood.<sup>1</sup>

But there was another and even more potent tradition in the Western Church. For the most part pagan Rome was tolerant of any and every religion, provided that there was no suspicion of its being employed to mask secret political conspiracy. When the latter was dreaded, panic set in, and there were persecutions, which as a rule soon terminated, but in which many thousands of Christians met their death. For the dweller at Rome, whether pagan or Christian, the place of interment was the catacombs. Rome did not war with the dead; and down to the galleries and chambers of the catacombs the Christian burial clubs transported the bodies of their martyred brethren. Here, too, in secret, in times of persecution, assemblies for Christian worship took place in the larger subterranean chambers. In such a chamber the body of a more famous martyr was usually enclosed in a sarcophagus placed on the floor of the chamber in a recess or "*arcisolum*," beneath an arched canopy hewn out of the solid rock. Here then, ready to hand, was an altar, viz., the coffin slab beneath which the body of the martyr lay. Just then as the wooden table was connected in loving memory by the early Christians with many generations of good Christian people living peaceably in their habitations, so the stone altar called to mind hurried, secret, perilous communions of the Christians of Rome down in the noisome gloom of the catacombs, lit only by flickering lamp or torch, before the altartomb of him whose fate might any moment be theirs. Such an altar slab may be seen in the catacombs of Naples above the coffin of St Gaudiosus, and therefore of the date 453-468. A magnificent sarcophagus-altar remains in a chapel of the Renaissance church of S. Celso, Milan; formerly it was in the Romanesque church and encased in marble. A sarcophagus is employed as altar in the church of the two Maries in Florence; at St Clamens, Gers; at Tongres, Holland; in the crypt of S. Zeno, Verona; two in S. Stefano, Bologna; a very fine one is to be seen in the Christian Museum at Perugia. It was long, however, before the superior tradition of the stone altar was generally accepted. The Greek Church, not being in heritage to the catacomb tradition, ever retained the wooden table. St Silvester indeed (314-336) ordered that altars in the Western Church should be of stone;<sup>2</sup> and the order was renewed in the Council of Epône,

<sup>1</sup> See illustration in *La Messe*, vol. i. In mediæval Latin the term "*mensa*" is usually confined to the slab which forms the upper part of the altar.

<sup>2</sup> This decree is of doubtful authenticity.