

they were excavated by the Christians for the purpose of burial, on account of their rejection of the Roman mode of burning the dead. In process of time these subterranean recesses became very extensive, winding in a net-work or series of labyrinths around nearly the whole city, and having openings in different directions. From the nature of the excavations the secret clue to their windings was known to the Christians alone. And there was thus prepared by the providence of God an asylum for the Church in the days of her persecution, with which the persecutor was to a great extent unacquainted. The Christians took care to extend these subterranean hiding-places, and to make them more intricate by lateral branches, by blocking up some of the passages, and by excavating further lines of galleries both above and beneath them, so as, if possible, to baffle the pursuit of their enemies. Indeed the extent of these labyrinths is almost incredible: they have been traced to a distance of nearly twenty miles; and there is no doubt that to this day a great part of the ground in the vicinity of the city of Rome is completely honey-combed by these excavations. The Christians also made additions to the number of openings into them, so as to give a more ready access, and also made perforations in places not easily detected, so as to give air, and, to a limited extent, a few rays of light.

Thus was the Church of Christ prepared when the persecutions of the Emperors broke out. It was some time before she became the subject of remark, and during those days of peace, when she was gradually embracing among her followers men of all ranks until she became a great multitude, it is probable that the Catacombs were only used by the Christians for the purpose of burying their dead. But soon the scene was changed, and the flame of persecution commenced. Nero was the first who unsheathed his sword against the Christians, and from his time until the days of Constantine,—that is to say, for nearly three centuries,—there were comparatively few periods of rest for the Church. There was constant anxiety, even when the imperial edicts were not put in force, and on the first sign of danger recourse was had to those dark but protecting caverns. It is probable that those who were most exposed to the wrath of the