

closer intercourse with the centre of civilization had conferred on continental Churches.

2. Passing on, now, from the external relations of the Church in Britain, let us proceed to notice the leading features of its internal condition before the age of Augustin. There is no reason to suppose that the growth of Christianity in Britain received any serious check during the first three centuries, that is, until the reign of Diocletian. For the genius of polytheism, especially maintained as it was during the Empire, from motives rather of expediency than belief, was generally tolerant of other religions, so long as they did not aspire to rivalry with itself; and to this we may add the obvious policy which would avoid unnecessary exasperation of popular feeling in a newly-conquered and remote province. But the existence of a strong popular feeling in its favour must imply that Christianity was pretty generally professed in Great Britain at the time of the Roman invasions; that is, during the first two centuries. And there is no reason to doubt that such was the fact, at least in the latter part of this period, if the number of Christians bore any proportion to that of the Christian Bishops in the age preceding the Anglo-Saxon conquest. For seven British prelates* met and discussed the objects of his mission with Augustin, shortly after his landing; and inasmuch as the greater part of the population had by that time relapsed into paganism, if we allow for the whole Island in the previous age, a number proportionate to that of the Bishops of Western Britain then assembled, we shall have a total greater even than at present.† This general profession of Christianity by the British, if true at the time of the later Roman invasions,—that of Severus, for example,—can, indeed, hardly date so early as Claudius; but the new *superstition* had not at that time attracted much notice at Rome itself; and we may well suppose the smallness of their number to have afforded the Christians an equal guarantee of safety in the more remote provinces of the Empire. During the reign of Nero, which might have been thought likely to form an exception to this tranquility, the Roman power itself was on the decline in Britain; besides which an abundant supply of victims was found in Rome to satisfy the imperial craving for shrieks of agony and the flare of human torches. It was, moreover, against the Druids, not against the Christians, that the efforts of Suetonius Paulinus were especially directed, the Island of Mona being, in fact, the nucleus of opposition to the Roman arms. The same policy seems to have been followed by the Romans in subsequent invasions; conquest was their object, and, this secured, the religion of the inhabitants was not, as a

* Be'e, ii, 2.

† cf. Bingham, Ant. Bk. ix, c. 6, § 20.