

THE COLONIAL CHURCHMAN.

"BUILT UPON THE FOUNDATION OF THE APOSTLES AND PROPHETS, JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF BEING THE CHIEF CORNER STONE..... Eph. 2 c. 20 v.

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For the Colonial Churchman.

CHURCH PROPERTY IN THE TIME OF THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE THE GREAT.

Essay 5.

DURING the three first centuries of Christianity, the chief part of the Church's Revenue or income property, was revived from the oblations and offerings of the people. Every one who became a convert to the faith, appears to have been guided by the precepts which the Apostles enjoined in this particular, and to have given according to his ability for the furtherance of the Gospel. The contributions, which were thus universally bestowed by the first christians, not only sufficed for the support of the ministry, and the relief of the poor, but even swelled through time to a considerable amount of landed and other property. By the law of the Roman Empire, which then extended over most parts of the civilized world, every free born citizen, whatever may have been his peculiar opinion, was entitled to the privilege of retaining possessions of all kinds. And it can readily be imagined that, when an imperial edict did not prevent the free exercise of this privilege, the christians would avail themselves of it for securing church property in lands and houses. The Edicts of the Emperor, however, which were both frequent and severe, were competent to strip them of their national rights, and to doom them as a body to persecution and death. The same authority could confiscate and alienate all their property and possessions, moveable and immovable, and thus reduce them to the most abject penury. For these reasons, church property of an immoveable nature did not accumulate to any great extent, during the ages of persecution.

But that it formed a considerable item in the income of the ministry, may be proved beyond a doubt, by the words of Chrysostom. It appears that in proportion as the landed property of the church increased, the zeal which prompted the extreme liberality of the first converts, sensibly abated: so that with an ostensible increase of possessions, the condition of the working ministry was in reality much worse than that of the early preachers. Under these circumstances, St. Chrysostom—Hom. lxxxvi. in Matth.—exhorts the people to return to their ancient liberality. "There are," he says, "in this place," meaning the city of Antioch "by the grace of God an hundred thousand persons that come to church. Now if every one of these would but give one loaf of bread daily to the poor, the poor would live in plenty. If every one would contribute but one half-penny, no man would want: neither should we undergo so many reproaches and derisions as if we are too intent upon our possessions."

Be this as it may—the landed property of the church seems to have been only a secondary source of Revenue, so long as the christians were exposed to the danger and dread of persecution. A new and a more glorious era was, however, at hand. By an imperial decree of Maximian, who preceded Constantine in the throne of the Cæsars, the christians were permitted to "apply themselves to that religion which they had usually followed, in such a manner as is pleasing and acceptable to every one of them. We do also," the Edict proceeds, "permit them to rebuild their oratories. Moreover we have decreed that all houses, estates, and possessions, which the followers of the new sect may have lost by former edicts, be restored unto them as a gratuity: that so all men may hereby be sensible of our piety and providence in this concern." Euseb. Hist. Lib ix. c. 10.

This favourable Edict was published in the year 313 of our era, the last of Maximian's reign; for he died soon after. The same year Constantine assumed the imperial diadem; a circumstance which, from their previous knowledge of his disposition and character, caused great joy among all the professors of christianity. Nor were their expectations disappointed. So soon as this celebrated monarch was quietly settled on the throne, his first care appears to have been directed to the condition of the church, and the propagation of the gospel.

In the second year of his reign, that is, in the year 314 of our era, he caused to be published those various edicts, which, first of all restored the christians to the full exercise of their national privileges, then put them on the same political footing with the heathens, and which finally established christianity as the public Religion of the Roman Empire. These favourable events opened up sources of revenue and property which were unknown in the primitive church, and which I will proceed now to enumerate.

1. First of all, a law was enacted at Rome, which is still extant, and may be seen in the code of Justinian—Lib. I. Tit. 2. Leg. 1—setting forth—"that any one whatsoever should have liberty at his death to bequeath by will any portion he chose of his worldly goods for the support of the christian church." Formerly the liberality of individuals could be scarcely said to be of any permanent benefit to the church: because ecclesiastical property of every description was subject to confiscation at the will of the reigning monarch. But the above cited statute gave a permanent and secure character to such donations and bequests as the piety of the wealthier christians led them to devote to the use of the sanctuary. Property rapidly increased under its salutary influence, and contributed not a little to the foundation and endowment of the various institutions of learning and piety to which, under Providence, so much of the success of the gospel may be attributed. The law here referred to was passed in the year 321.

2. Another source from which church property received an augmentation, was the public revenue of the Empire.—The Emperor Constantine not only bestowed gifts to a considerable amount upon individual clergymen, according as their exigencies seemed to require, but also ordered a settled allowance to be made to others out of the Exchequer. For in one of his Epistles to Caccilian, Bishop of Carthage, which is recorded by Eusebius—Hist. Lib. x. cap. 6—he informs that prelate that he had given orders to Urcus, his Receiver General for Africa, to pay into his hands 3000 Pelles, to be divided at his discretion among the clergy of the Provinces of Carthage, Numidia, and the two Muritanias. And if this sum would not be sufficient for the present necessities of the church, a further sum, to cover every exigency, was ordered to be paid into the hands of the same Bishop by the imperial Procurator Heraclides. The sum above mentioned 3000 Pelles or Pholles—is supposed by the learned to amount to more than £20,000 sterling.

3. Besides a law was enacted shortly afterwards by the same monarch, providing that a standing allowance be made to the African clergy out of the Public Treasury. For the Ecclesiastical Historian Theodoret, who flourished about the time of Constantine, informs us—Lib. I. cap. 11—that a certain statute, passed under the imperial authority, requiring the chief magistrates and governors in every province, to grant the clergy, and virgins and widows of the church, an annual allowance of corn out of

the yearly tribute of every city. This law continued in force until the time of Julian, commonly called the apostate, when it was repealed.

4. Eusebius in his life of Constantine—Lib. II. cap. 36. mentions another enactment by the operation of which considerable addition would, in the course of time, be made to church property. The statute in question provided, that "all the Estates of martyrs and confessors and whoever had suffered in time of persecution, should be restored to their next relations; and that, if any of them died without relations, the church should become their heir, and succeed to all their inheritance."

5. A similar enactment was made about a century afterwards, by the Emperors Theodosius Junior, and Valentinian III. with reference to the temporal possessions of the clergy. It went to the effect, that, "if any presbyter or deacon, or subdeacon, or other clerk, or any man or woman professing a monastic life, died without will and without heirs, their estates and goods should fall to the church or the monastery to which they belonged." This is stated on the authority of the Theodosian Code of Roman Laws—Lib. V. Tit. 3. Leg. 1—The statute which made this provision underwent in aftertimes several modifications, and is, I believe, an article of discipline in the church of Rome at the present day.

6. A still further source from which the church revenues were augmented in the time of Constantine, consisted in donations of the Heathen temples and of the lands settled upon them. It was indeed the common practice for the Emperor to confiscate this kind of property to his own use, and to receive its proceeds into his own coffers. But it appears from the authority above cited—Theod. Cod. Lib. xvi. Tit. 10. Leg. 19 et 20—that in most instances the property thus realized, was bestowed for the use and support of the christian sanctuary. And the Emperor Honorius, who ascended the throne in 395, is said to have issued several orders and decrees, by which the property and revenues of the Pagan temples became the patrimony of the church *in perpetuum*. Likewise the historian Sozomen—Lib. V. cap. 7—informs us that the Temple of the Sun, at Alexandria, was given to the church by Constantine, the son of the emperor Constantine; and that in the time of Theodosius the statues of Serapis, and many other idols at Alexandria, were melted down for religious uses: the order being, "that the gods should help to maintain the poor."

Thus it may be perceived that in an inconceivably short time after the political establishment of christianity throughout the Roman empire, the property and revenues of the christian church were very considerable; and that matters were arranged in such a favourable manner as to insure a perpetual increase. Like all other things committed to the care of mortals, the accumulation of worldly goods which these arrangements were calculated to effect, were subject to abuse, which, as I shall endeavour to shew on a future occasion, soon began to pervade every part of ecclesiastical revenues and appropriation.

7. Another source of church property at the time of which I am speaking, consisted in tithes and first-fruits. This indeed constituted the principal means by which the clergy were supported. But as the subject involves matters which deserve a particular consideration, I will treat of it more at large in my next Essay.

CRITO.