

# SOCIAL ACTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH 30-180 A.D.

PAUL HANLY FURFEY

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Washington, D. C.

## II. THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

NEW Testament social doctrine was sharply at variance with the current thought of the Roman Empire and therefore it was necessarily revolutionary. "I have come to bring a sword, not peace. For I have come to set a man at variance with his father, and a daughter with her mother, and a daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household."<sup>76</sup> The revolutionary character of Christianity, however, was highly personal. It did not show itself in the form of armed rebellion. It was by a revolution in men's lives that the early Church reformed the social order.

This interior but potent revolution centered around a new conception of human dignity. Contemporary Rome did not set a high value on the person as such and consequently Roman society was highly stratified. Slaves were denied their elementary human rights; free non-citizens were underprivileged in comparison with citizens; and even among the citizens themselves a small aristocratic class enjoyed most of the power and privileges. Such institutions as gladiatorial combats and the *patria potestas* with its *ius vitae ac necis* reflected a certain callous indifference towards the rights of the individual. Against this viewpoint Christianity vigorously asserted the dignity of the human person. Its uncompromising assertion of this dignity acted as a leaven in contemporary society, as a solvent which dissolved, in the long run, the principal problems which plagued the Roman world. To understand early Christian social thought it is therefore very necessary to examine in its various ramifications the Christian attitude toward the dignity of human personality.

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<sup>76</sup>Mt. 10:35-36. Unless otherwise specified, New Testament quotations will be taken from the new version prepared by the Catholic Biblical Association of America. This version appeared too late to be used in the first article of this series: cf. *Theol. Stud.* 2 (1941) 171-197.

A respect for others' dignity must be rooted in humility. The proud man emphasizes his own rights and privileges at the expense of others; but the humble man respects the human personality in others as well as in himself. Humility, therefore, is repeatedly urged on the Christians. "If anyone thinks himself to be something, whereas he is nothing, he deceives himself" (Gal. 6:3). "Let no one rate himself more than he ought, but let him rate himself according to moderation" (Rom. 12:3). "Do not set your mind on high things but condescend to the lowly" (Rom. 12:16).<sup>77</sup>

The early Fathers speak the same language as St. Paul. "I know you are not puffed up; for you have Jesus Christ in yourselves" (Ig. *Mag.* 12:1). "Let us seek to be imitators of the Lord [and seek] who may be the more wronged, who may be the more destitute, who may be the more despised" (Ig. *Eph.* 10:3). Tatian boasts, "Among us there is no passion for vain-glory" (*Tat.* 32).<sup>78</sup>

Pope St. Clement writing to the Corinthians had a particular reason to urge humility. The Church at Corinth was split by disedifying factions. St. Clement saw a lack of humility as a fundamental cause of such disputes. He recalls the happy days before the rise of party spirit. "You were all humble-minded and not at all arrogant, yielding subjection rather than demanding it" (*Clem.* 2:1). Now they must return to this blessed condition, imitating the humility of Abraham, Job, Moses, and David (*Clem.* 17-18) and especially of Christ (*Clem.* 16). They must flee "abominable pride" (*Clem.* 30:1). They must be humble "putting aside all arrogance" (*Clem.* 13:1). Only by such means can they attain once more to a true Christian peace.

Humility obviously banishes jealousy. "Hatred shall be taken from the earth and along with jealousy it shall be drowned" (*Od. Sol.* 7:20). St. Clement urged the Corinthians to avoid jealousy for the same reason that he counseled humility. He

<sup>77</sup>See also, I Pet. 3:8; I Thess. 2:6; Heb. 13:13.

<sup>78</sup>See also, *Eph. Apost.* (Copt.) 41 (52); Just. I *Apol.* 16:1, 16:3, 16:4.

recounts from the Old Testament various examples of the evil wrought by jealousy (*Clem.* 4) and exhorts his readers to "root out the wicked passion of your jealousy" (*Clem.* 63:2).<sup>79</sup>

Respect for the human personality also implies sincerity. "Teaching is good, if one practises what one preaches" (*Ig. Eph.* 15:1). We must be "justified by deeds, not words" (*Clem.* 30:3). Thus the conduct of the Christians must stand in sharp contrast to the practice of the pagans. Particularly abhorrent among the latter were those who gave false witness against the martyrs. "The lips of other men and women were cut off—deception was their crime—and fire flowed into their mouth and their intestines. Such were those who had done the martyrs to death by their false testimony" (*Apoc. Pet.* (Eth.) 9).

Sincerity implies the duty of fraternal correction. "Even if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual instruct such a one in a spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (*Gal.* 6:1). "He who causes a sinner to be brought back from his misguided way, will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins" (*Jas.* 5:20). "Some thou shalt reprove" (*Did.* 2:7). "In gentleness bring to subjection the more troublesome" (*Ig. Pol.* 2:1).

A fundamental regard for human dignity implies a certain disregard for artificial distinctions between one individual and another. The Christian must always be conscious that every human being is made in God's image and likeness and redeemed by Jesus Christ. Therefore he will place relatively less emphasis on dignity which depends on social status. The opposite attitude is expressed in the New Testament by the term, *προσωποληψία*, *respect of persons*. In this phrase the word *persons* is obviously used in a somewhat different sense from that occurring in the preceding paragraphs. It refers to particular persons; and respect of persons is the attitude which accords different treatment to different individuals for insufficient reasons. It is the attitude which fails properly to emphasize the fundamental human dignity in respect to which all men are equal.

<sup>79</sup>See also, *Pt.-Clem.* 4:3.

The term, προσωποληψία, has an interesting history. It corresponds to the Old Testament concept expressed by *nasa phanim*, literally, *lift up the face*. The reference seems to be to the custom of prostrating oneself in the presence of a monarch. If the latter wishes to show special consideration for a visitor he can release him from his prostrate position by lifting up his face. Thus the term came to mean showing partiality to a particular individual.<sup>80</sup> The Greek term is evidently a literal translation of the Hebrew.

There are frequent warnings in our literature against this evil. "My brethren," says St. James, "do not join faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ to partiality towards persons" (Jas. 2:1). Polycarp warns the Philippians to choose presbyters who refrain from respect of persons (Pol. *Phil.* 6:1). Christians must have this attitude because it is also the attitude of God. Thus masters must bear this motive in mind in their dealings with their slaves: "Give up threatening, knowing that their Lord who is also your Lord is in heaven, and that with him there is no respect of persons."<sup>81</sup>

The attitude of Christians toward human respect was manifested with especial clarity in their relations with certain groups to whom Roman custom arbitrarily accorded a more or less inferior position. In this category belong women, children, slaves, enemies, and persons of other races. As one might guess, the disabilities suffered by these various classes differed sharply from group to group; but they had in common the fact that they were denied their human rights in some respect or other. Christian social action scored some of its most signal triumphs by insisting that these rights be recognized.

Under the Roman republic the legal position of women was most unenviable. They were excluded from all participation in public life. They could not make a contract or a will, bear witness in court, adopt a child, or act as guardian. Divorce, from the husband's standpoint, was very easy. On the other hand

<sup>80</sup>Brown, F., Driver, S.R., and Briggs, C.A. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Boston. Houghton, Mifflin. 1907.) *Sub verbo, nasa*.

<sup>81</sup>Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25.

the harshness of these legal provisions was mitigated by custom. For example, public opinion stood against divorce, and Sp. Carvilius Maximus Ruga (died 211 B.C.) is said to have been the first man in five hundred years to divorce his wife. As time went on, many of woman's legal disabilities were removed by legislation, judicial precedent, or by the use of legal fictions. At the same time public opinion became gradually more and more tolerant and there was a gradual relaxation of moral tone. Under the early Empire divorce was invoked for the most frivolous reasons. Juvenal represents a husband sending his wife the message: "Pack up your things and be off! I'm tired of you; you are forever blowing your nose. Be off, and quickly, too! Another wife, with a dry nose, is on her way."<sup>82</sup> In the meantime morals had declined. Augustus was forced to legislate on adultery and chastity and the encouragement of marriage.<sup>83</sup> He boasted that he restored the ancient traditions which were falling into disuse.<sup>84</sup> It is hard to say just what this moral decline meant to the average Roman woman since our sources deal nearly exclusively with the aristocracy;<sup>85</sup> but the satirists of the time have much to say about the immorality, irresponsibility, and cruelty of high-born Roman matrons.

Among the Jews also the position of woman was not high. Polygamy was still practised at the opening of the Christian Era, as the example of Herod the Great shows. It appears, however, to have been quite rare. Divorce on the other hand seems to have been common. The Mosaic Law allowed a husband to divorce his wife "for some uncleanness" (Deut. 24:1). The meaning of this phrase was disputed. The school of Shammai (a contemporary of Christ) understood "uncleanness" (*erwah*) to refer to adultery only. The rival school of Hillel, on the other hand, interpreted the word very broadly. A man might divorce his wife for the smallest faults, or even because he found some other woman more attractive. The Rabbis had a low opinion of women. They should not be instructed in the

<sup>82</sup>Juvenal, *Satires* 6:146-48.

<sup>83</sup>Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 34.

<sup>84</sup>*Res gestae Divi Augusti* 8.

<sup>85</sup>For a balanced discussion, see L. Friedlander, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*. (New York. Dutton. 1936.) 1:228-267.

Law. One should not speak with a woman on the street, not even his own wife.<sup>86</sup> It is not surprising that the Apostles "wondered" when they found Our Lord conversing with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:27).

Christianity changed all this. The marriage contract became indissoluble and woman was freed from the insecurity of an always possible divorce. "To those who are married, not I, but the Lord commands that a wife is not to depart from her husband, and if she departs, that she is to remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And let not a husband put away his wife" (I Cor. 7:10-11). Among Christians, boasts Theophilus, "monogamy is observed" (*Theo.* 3:15). St. Justin speaks of the Christians "sitting each under his own vine, that is, married to a sole lawful wife" (Just. *Dial.* 110:3).

From Christian marriage woman acquired a new dignity. The husband could no longer regard his wife as merely an object for his own selfish pleasure. He must love her (Col. 3:19) as himself (Eph. 5:33), as his own body (Eph. 5:28), and even as Christ loved the Church (Eph. 5:25). This last Apostolic admonition is repeated by St. Ignatius (Ig. *Pol.* 5:1). Husbands must be considerate with their wives. "Husbands in like manner dwell with your wives considerately, paying honor to the woman as to the weaker vessel, and as co-heir to the grace of life" (I Pet. 3:7). The obligation to consent to the marriage act is perfectly mutual (I Cor. 7:3-5). An epitaph in the Cappella Graeca in the Cemetery of Priscilla suggests how these admonitions were honored in practice: "Obrimus to the memory of his blessed and most tender spouse Nestoriane."<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, Christian writers never accepted the viewpoint of extreme feminism and always insisted that the wife must be ready to obey her husband.<sup>88</sup> Wives must yield this subjection, "because a husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the Church" (Eph. 5:23). The ideal wife is pure, meek, gentle, and silent (*Clem.* 21:7); her real adornment is "a quiet and gentle

<sup>86</sup>A. Plummer. *The Gospel according to S. John.* (Cambridge. University Press. 1929.) p. 122.

<sup>87</sup>DAC 2:2084.

<sup>88</sup>Eph. 5:33; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; I Pet. 3:1, 5-6; *Clem.* 1:3.

spirit" (I Pet. 3:4); she is loyal, loving, chaste, and dutiful (Pol. *Phil.* 4:2).

Women played a rather prominent part in the early history of the Church. Phoebe was active "in the ministry of the church at Cenchrae" (Rom. 16:1), and assisted many, including St. Paul himself. Prisca, wife of Aquila, appears as an important figure on several occasions.<sup>89</sup> In the sixteenth chapter of Romans St. Paul greets fifteen women and eighteen men, a fact which roughly indicates the importance of the feminine element in missionary activity. Elsewhere we hear of Evodia, Syntyche, Mary the mother of Mark, Tabitha, Lydia, Damaris, the daughters of Philip, and others at Thessalonica, and Beroea.<sup>90</sup> St. Clement (6:2) in an obscure passage seems to be praising the heroism of female Christian martyrs and St. Ignatius mentions Tavia (Ig. *Sm.* 13:2) and Alce (Ig. *Pol.* 8:3). Pliny found *ministrae* (deaconesses?) among the Christians in Bithynia.<sup>91</sup> Among the companions of St. Justin who were martyred with him was one woman, and Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth, corresponded with Chrysophora.<sup>92</sup> There is also historical and archaeological evidence for the presence among the Roman Christians of a number of prominent women. Among these may be mentioned, with more or less certainty, Pomponia Graecina, Claudia Acte, Flavia Domitilla (probably two of that name), Lucia, Acilia Priscilla, and others.<sup>93</sup> The widows discussed by St. Paul (I Tim. 5:3-16), like Phoebe at Cenchrae (Rom. 16:1), seem to have had a certain formal role in the ecclesiastical organization.

It is obvious that the two sexes cooperated rather freely in the life of the early Church. St. Paul approves this cooperation. "Neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man in the Lord" (I Cor. 11:11). And again, "There

<sup>89</sup>Acts 18:18-26; Rom. 16:3; II Tim. 4:19.

<sup>90</sup>Phil. 4:2; Acts 12:12; 9:36; 16:14; 17:34; 21:9; 17:4; 17:12. It is uncertain whether in Col. 4:15 we should read Nympha (feminine) or Nymphas (masculine). The manuscript authority is fairly evenly divided.

<sup>91</sup>Pliny. *Letters* 10:96.

<sup>92</sup>Eusebius. *H. E.* 4, 23:13.

<sup>93</sup>For further data see, H. Leclercq. "Aristocratiques (classes)." (*DAC* 1:2845-86). For a discussion of the general position of women in the early Church see the same author's article, "Femme." (*DAC* 5:1300-53).

is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This fundamental human equality on essential points did not exclude inequality of function in church services. There was never any question of conferring Holy Orders on women. Moreover they must keep their heads covered in church, thus implying an inferior position (I Cor. 11:2-16). Women may not teach (I Tim. 2:12) but are to keep silent in church (I Cor. 14:34). This latter prohibition, however, did not interfere with a woman's privilege of praying or prophesying in the assemblies (I Cor. 11:5). These functions were charisms and not subject to the ordinary regulations.

The intransigent Christian stand against loose sex morals was a great boon to woman. Immorality was rife in the pagan world and woman was often regarded as little more than a sexual object. Christians were deeply shocked at these conditions. "They have given themselves up in despair to sensuality, greedily practising every kind of uncleanness" (Eph. 4:19). St. Justin notes the changed attitude on sex which follows conversion (Just. I *Apol.* 14:2), and comments bitterly on the extreme excesses of pagan prostitution (Just. I *Apol.* 27:4) from which the emperor did not hesitate to accept taxes (Just. I *Apol.* 27:1-2). The *Apocalypse of Peter* describes the terrible punishments of immoral women in the world to come.<sup>94</sup> St. Paul notes the prevalence of unnatural vice among the pagans (Rom. 1:26-27). Crescens, persecutor of St. Justin, was notorious for this vice (*Tat.* 19).

Christians, on the other hand, were constantly urged to be pure<sup>95</sup> even in thought (*Theo.* 3:13) and speech (Eph. 5:3). St. Paul was very much disturbed at the case of incest in Corinth and devotes an entire chapter to it (I Cor. 5). In spite of such lapses the Christians could boast of a generally high standard of purity in practice. They "abstain from adultery and fornication" (*Arist.* (Gr.) 15:4). They practice continence and purity (*Theo.* 3:15). "Their wives are chaste as virgins"

<sup>94</sup>*Apoc. Pet.* (Eth.) 7 and 11, (*Akhnim Fragment*), 9, 24.

<sup>95</sup>Rom. 13:13-14; I Cor. 6:12-20; I Thess. 4:3; Col. 3:5; *Clem.* 21:7; *Pol. Phil.* 5:3; and *Hermas passim*, especially *Mand.* 4.



(*Arist. (Syr.)* 15:6).<sup>96</sup> The chaste Susanna was represented in the Cappella Graeca. Pliny reported to Trajan that the Christians "bound themselves by a solemn oath . . . never to commit . . . adultery."<sup>97</sup> St. Paul insists on modesty which is an obvious safeguard to purity. "I wish women to be decently dressed, adorning themselves with modesty and dignity" (I Tim. 2:9).

To avoid sins of the flesh is of course a matter of precept; but Christians carried their devotion to purity further than this and honored virginity as a counsel of perfection. The fundamental doctrine is laid down by St. Paul: "It is good for man not to touch woman" (I Cor. 7:1). "I say to the unmarried and to widows, it is good for them if they so remain, even as I" (I Cor. 7:8). This Christian attitude is often misrepresented as though marriage were regarded as something evil in itself. This is very far from the truth. Marriage had been raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament. To regard it as bad or degrading would be an implied blasphemy: an opinion characteristic of certain definitely heretical sects. St. Paul does not look upon marriage as inferior to virginity on account of any disgust with its legitimate physical side but rather for a very practical reason. "He who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please God. Whereas he who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided" (I Cor. 7:32-33). Christians practised celibacy "in the hope of living in closer communion with God" (*Ath. Sup.* 33), and therefore they honored virginity.<sup>98</sup> The effect of this was to generate a new respect for woman. She was no longer a mere sexual object; she was a person.

The Christian doctrine of womanhood was eminently sane, moderate, and balanced; the heretics were not so reasonable. In the apocryphal *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, St. Paul is represented as indiscriminately counseling married people to give up the use of marriage. The attitude of the real Paul is stated very definite-

<sup>96</sup>See also Just. I *Apol.* 27:1; *Ep. Diog.* 5:7; *Ath. Sup.* 32.

<sup>97</sup>Pliny. *Letters* 10:96.

<sup>98</sup>See also Just. I *Apol.* 15:6 and 29:1.

ly in I Cor. 7:5.<sup>99</sup> St. Justin mentions a Christian who asked the governor of Alexandria to allow him to be castrated to convince him that Christians were not sexually immoral (Just. I. *Apol.* 29:2). This curious incident throws some light on the motives which led certain persons into Encratism. On the other hand Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth, wrote to Pinytos, Bishop of Cnossos, advising him "not to lay on the brethren a heavy compulsory burden in regard to chastity, but to consider the weaknesses of the many."<sup>100</sup> Another strange exaggeration of the true Christian attitude also occurs in the *Acta Pauli et Theclae*. As we have seen already, the real Paul placed certain definite bounds on the activity of women. These apocryphal acts represent Thecla taking a very prominent part in Church activities, a part which would certainly not have been allowed to a woman in actual Christian practice.

The full effect of the Christian doctrine about women is, of course, not visible during the period we are now studying. The Church was a small and persecuted minority and Christian opinion was naturally uninfluential. But the new ideas were working like a leaven and when the Empire became Christian their effects were at length manifest. It has been well said that the works of the Fathers are an excellent commentary on the constitutions of the later emperors. Certainly the latter embodied many ideas of the former. In these constitutions Christian ideas on marriage, divorce, celibacy, adultery, found their legal expression. Women were given a greater dignity. Pagan Rome would scarcely have tolerated the rule of a Pulcheria or an Irene.

One of woman's most sacred duties was the bearing of children. This was her salvation (I Tim. 2:15). The marriage act is ordained for this purpose rather than for the mere satisfaction of desire, according to Athenagoras. "As the husbandman throwing the seed into the ground awaits the harvest, not sowing more upon it, so to us the procreation of children is the

<sup>99</sup>The same is stated of St. Peter in his apocryphal acts which, however, probably fall outside the time limits of this article. See *Act. Vercel.*, *passim*.

<sup>100</sup>Eusebius. *H. E.* 4, 23:7.

measure of our indulgence in appetite" (Ath. Sup. 33). But, however sacred childbearing was considered, Christians never taught the duty of having children up to the physiological limit. Tatian has no admiration for the surprising woman who bore thirty children (*Tat.* 34).

Abortion was common under the early Roman Empire.<sup>101</sup> The Christians reacted strongly against this. "We say that those women who use drugs to bring on an abortion commit murder and will have to give an account to God for the abortion" (Ath. Sup. 35). The *Apocalypse of Peter* details the horrible punishment of women who conceived out of wedlock and caused abortion (*Akbmin Fragment* 11, 26). After birth, the Roman law of the period still recognized the *ius exponendi*. But to Christians it was murder to expose children (Ath. Sup. 35). St. Justin says, "We fear that, for lack of anyone to adopt them, they will die and we will be guilty of homicide."<sup>102</sup> The *Apocalypse of Peter* is as severe against this abuse as against abortion.<sup>103</sup>

The Roman law was peculiarly hard on children. The father's rights were exaggerated to an extraordinary degree: he was the legal owner of all his son's property; he could put his child to death or sell him. Of course these extreme provisions were greatly modified in practice by natural parental affection. They were modified also by law as time went on. Under the early Empire the father no longer had the power of life and death. He could not administer extraordinary punishments nor sell his child except in dire poverty. Christians also upheld parental authority, but not for motives of selfish convenience. Rather they stressed the parents' duty to discipline children for the latter's good. "Thou shalt not withhold thy hand from thy son or thy daughter; but from their youth thou shalt teach them the fear of God."<sup>104</sup> Husbands must teach their wives to bring up the children in this holy fear (*Pol. Phil.* 4:2). The great sin

<sup>101</sup>See, for example, Aulus Gellius. *Noctes Atticae* 12, 1:8; Juvenal. *Satires* 2:32-33, 6:595-601.

<sup>102</sup>Just. I *Apol.* 29:1. See also Just. I *Apol.* 27:1.

<sup>103</sup>*Apoc. Pet.* (Eth.) 8. See also *Theo.* 1:2; *Ep. Diog.* 5:6.

<sup>104</sup>*Did.* 4:9; repeated in *Barn.* 19:5.

of Hermas was that he neglected his children and through this neglect became personally responsible for their evil deeds.<sup>105</sup>

Modern child psychology has stressed the danger of too stern discipline which may destroy initiative and interfere with self-development. It is interesting to see that St. Paul also was conscious of this danger. "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, that they may not be discouraged."<sup>106</sup> Parental authority was tempered by love. The early catacomb inscriptions speak touchingly of "the most sweet son" or "the most sweet daughter" of the bereaved parents.<sup>107</sup>

If parents have the right to control their children, then it is the latter's duty to yield their parents respect and obedience. This they should do out of a religious motive.<sup>108</sup> Children should not be forward. "It is unseemly that young children be wise beyond their years; for as in stature one increases by an orderly progress, so also in wisdom" (*Theo.* 2:25). Christians could boast that their sons and daughters were respectful and well behaved.<sup>109</sup> Those who did not honor and obey their parents were menaced with a terrible punishment in hell.<sup>110</sup>

The Romans' lack of respect for the human person is seen more clearly perhaps in their treatment of slaves than anywhere else. The master originally had the power of life and death over his slaves. The slave could not legally possess property. His marriage was not a legal marriage, but only cohabitation (*contubernium*). He could not hold office or serve in the army or give evidence as a witness except under torture. His crimes were punished with special severity. Particularly miserable was the condition of slaves who worked in mines or quarries, on the great rural estates, or in the establishments of the *leno* or *lanista*. Household slaves often fared better; genuine loyalty and affection often existed between them and their masters. Yet masters might be capricious and cruel. The case

<sup>105</sup>Herm. Vis. 1, 3:1-2 and 2, 3:1.

<sup>106</sup>Col. 3:21. See also Eph. 6:4.

<sup>107</sup>DAC 2:1031-32.

<sup>108</sup>Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20; Clem. 21:8.

<sup>109</sup>Arist. (Gr.) 15:4.

<sup>110</sup>Apoc. Pet. (Eth.) 11.

of the notorious P. Vedius Pollio is well known. He punished slaves for minor offenses by having them eaten alive by his lampreys.<sup>111</sup> The misery of the slaves is vividly reflected in their fierce revolts and in the Roman's fear of them. There were three desperate servile wars under the late Republic. Under the early Empire a minor rising in southern Italy terrified the populace at Rome.<sup>112</sup> Lepida was prosecuted because "by her negligence in coercing her regiments of slaves in Calabria she was threatening the peace of Italy."<sup>113</sup> When Pedanius Secundus was murdered by one of his slaves, the entire household of four hundred was put to death. Gaius Cassius justified this excessive cruelty in the Senate and between the lines of his speech we can read the terror in which the Romans lived.<sup>114</sup> During the second century of the Christian Era there was a definite humanitarian movement and some of the worst injustices were gradually abolished by law. However, the lot of the unfree remained wretched at best.

The Apostles and the earliest Christians were Jews among whom slavery existed only in a very mild form. As Christianity spread through the pagan world it came into contact with the outrageous form of slavery described above. It is interesting and instructive to see how the Christians met this challenge. They did not demand the liberation of the slaves by law; that would have been a useless demand in a totalitarian state. They did not encourage the slaves to revolt; that would have been futile and would have involved enormous bloodshed. Rather, the Christians boldly applied their doctrine of the sacredness of the human person to slaves. They practised it themselves and gradually converted others by their example. In the meantime they were content to tolerate the external form of slavery until it fell by its own weight.

The essential equality of master and man depends on the doctrine of the Mystical Body. "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free"

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<sup>111</sup>Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 54:23.

<sup>112</sup>Tacitus, *Annals* 4:27.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.* 12:65.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.* 14:42-45.

(I Cor. 12:13). The result of this is to blot out social distinctions: "There is neither slave nor freeman" (Gal. 3:28). When slaves are converted, Christians "call them brothers without distinction" (*Arist. (Syr.)* 15:16). The free and the unfree will be rewarded in heaven according to the same rules (Eph. 6:8). Therefore for the Christians such terms as "slave" and "freeman" have lost their significance (Col. 3:11).

This doctrine was not merely taught as a beautiful theory; it was put into practice. In the churches slaves were not segregated, as serfs were in the Middle Ages. On the contrary, they might take Holy Orders and rise to high ecclesiastical office. The marriage of the free and unfree was recognized by the Church on exactly the same basis as in the case where both parties were free, in spite of the formal prohibition of the Roman law. Martyrdom gave the slaves a chance to prove their heroic virtue. One of St. Justin's companions, Euelpistus, a slave of Caesar, boasted to the judge: "I also am a Christian, freed by Christ, and by His grace partaking of the same hope" as his distinguished companion (*Acts of Justin*, 4:3). In the account of the martyrs of Lyons, the slave Blandina is prominent for her heroism amid a company which includes Pothinus, the bishop, and Epagathus, the decurion.

Since Christianity did not immediately abolish the institution of slavery, slaves were counseled to obey their masters and to perform scrupulously the duties of their humble state. This attitude on the Church's part has scandalized many moderns, but what alternative was there? As long as slavery existed there was nothing for the slave to do but to perform the work assigned him under an unjust institution. Whatever were his abstract rights, in the concrete it was his duty to obey. On this point the Church's teaching was unwavering. "Exhort slaves to obey their masters, pleasing them in all things and not opposing them; not pilfering, but showing faithfulness in all things" (Tit. 2:9-10).<sup>115</sup> The motive of this obedience should be the fear of God (Col. 3:22). Slaves should obey their masters as

<sup>115</sup>Parallel advice in I Tim. 6:1-2; I Pet. 2:18; *Tat.* 4 and 11; *Apoc. Pet.* (Eth.) 11.

they would Christ (Eph. 6:5) seeing in the master a type of God (*Barn.* 19:7; *Did.* 4:11), and enduring slavery for God's glory (*Ig. Pol.* 4:3). If a Christian slave had an opportunity to gain his freedom should he take advantage of it? St. Paul answers this question: "If thou canst become free, make use of it rather" (I Cor. 7:21). Unfortunately this reply is as ambiguous in the Greek as in the translation and it leaves the commentators hopelessly divided.

There were slave-owners among the Christians. "We have slaves; some, more; some, fewer" (*Ath. Sup.* 35). For these their duty was clear. They must give their slaves "what is just and fair" (*Col.* 4:1); they must "give up threatening" (*Eph.* 6:9); they must not "command in bitterness" their slaves and handmaids (*Did.* 4:10; *Barn.* 19:7); they must not "be haughty" with them (*Ig. Pol.* 4:3). The motive for this fair treatment is, says St. Paul, "that their Lord who is also your Lord is in heaven, and that with him there is no respect of persons" (*Eph.* 6:9). Christians could boast that they followed these precepts. They loved their slaves (*Arist. (Syr.)* 15:6) and the master's good example would necessarily affect the slaves (*Theo.* 2:17). Charity towards one's slaves should logically lead to manumission and Christians did this. The whole Epistle to Philemon is a plea for the manumission of Onesimus. It is hard to imagine that Philemon would resist St. Paul's appeal. Indeed Christians did more than merely free their own slaves. St. Clement's words show to what extremes their charity went: "We know that many among ourselves have given themselves into bondage that they might ransom others. Many have delivered themselves to slavery and provided food for others with the price they received for themselves."<sup>116</sup> Love for slaves could scarcely be carried further than this!

Race prejudice has been in all ages a very common attitude which leads to lack of respect for human rights. Under the early Roman Empire anti-Semitism was the most obvious example of this attitude. The position of the Jews was peculiar.

<sup>116</sup>*Clem.* 55:2. See also *Herm. Sim.* 1-8; *Herm. Mand.* 8:10.

They enjoyed special privileges and suffered from special disabilities. On the one hand they possessed a remarkable degree of ethnic autonomy, almost forming a state within a state—a truly surprising privilege in view of Rome's jealous desire for political unity. Again, they were exempted from participation in the official pagan cults and thus escaped the persecutions which Christians had to suffer on this basis. On the other hand, although Jews theoretically enjoyed the opportunity to acquire Roman citizenship and participate in civic activities on the same basis as other non-Italian peoples within the Empire, they rarely were able to hold public office or take any other active part in civic life. Finally, they had to contend with a rising tide of popular ill will which often made their lives miserable.

At the very time that Christianity began to spread through the Empire Roman-Jewish relations were in a critical state. Tiberius expelled the Jews from Rome but readmitted them later. Claudius expelled them once more. In the meantime at Alexandria in 38 A.D. there occurred what has been called "the first real pogrom."<sup>117</sup> The revolt in Judea which broke out under Nero and which led to the fall of Jerusalem naturally hurt the status of Jews throughout the Empire. Restrictive laws were passed under Vespasian and again under Hadrian.

The Jews were inclined to blame some of these misfortunes on the Christians. In the first century Romans regarded Christianity as a Jewish sect and their hatred of the former was transferred to the latter. This confusion seems to have resulted in the expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Claudius.<sup>118</sup> The Jews therefore were anxious to make it clear to their fellow citizens that they were distinct from the Christians and indeed that they shared the Roman distaste for the new religion. Jews helped "as usual" when Polycarp was martyred and prevented the Christians from recovering the body (*Martyr. Pol.* 13:1; 17:2; 18:1). The *Epistle to Diognetus* says that Jews "war

<sup>117</sup>S. W. Baron. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*. (New York. Columbia University Press. 1937.) 1:148.

<sup>118</sup>"Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit." Suetonius. *Claudius* 25:4.



upon" Christians (5:17). St. Justin calls attention to the persecution of Christians by Bar Cocheba (I *Apol.* 31:6). In his *Dialogue with Trypho* the same author stresses the Jewish hatred for Christians (108:3; 110:5; 134:5) and their systematic anti-Christian propaganda (17:1; 108:2).

The Jewish opposition did not arise from political considerations only. *Odium theologicum* entered in as well. Jews regarded Christians as heretics and renegades. The latter in turn felt hurt and embittered that Christ was not accepted by His own race as the Messiah. During the first or second century a special anti-Christian *Amidah* appeared in the synagogue service. The Christians in turn attacked the theological errors of the Jews.<sup>119</sup> In general these polemics were carried on without undue heat; but now and then a tone of irritation and contempt crept in. "Their scruples about food and superstition about the Sabbath, and their pride in circumcision and the sham of their fasting and feast of the new moon, are ridiculous and unworthy of any argument" (*Ep. Diog.* 4:1). Again, St. Justin was a little unfair in his accusation that the Jews deliberately altered the Sacred Scriptures to suit their purposes (*Just. Dial.* 72-73). On the other hand Christians were generous enough to praise the Jews' good qualities. "They imitate God by their love of men when they take pity on the poor and redeem captives and bury the dead and do other similar things" (*Arist. (Syr.)* 14:3).

All in all the Christians appear in a favorable light in their relations with the Jews during this early period. In the face of persecution they preserved their equanimity. It is unfortunate that subsequent generations of Catholics have not always been equally fair and charitable in their relations with the Jews. The principle which underlay the attitude of the early Church was the familiar one that Christ died for all and that in consequence we must love all. "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for there is the same Lord of all, rich towards all who call upon him" (Rom. 10:12). "There is not 'Gentile and Jew'" (Col. 3:11). In fact if the Jews form an exception to

<sup>119</sup>*Ep. Diog.* 3 and 4; *Arist. (Syr.)* 14:4; *Just. Dial. passim*.

the general rule of human equality in any sense, they do so in a sense favorable to themselves. They are God's chosen people. Gentiles must be humble, for they are latecomers, becoming participants in the divine plan only at the Redemption. It is true that the Jews sinned grievously by rejecting the Messias, but they will finally be converted (Rom. 11:11-29).

There is a final class towards whom Christians must scrupulously apply their doctrine of charity and personal respect, namely, their enemies. There is a natural enough human tendency to put these in a special category and to refuse to them the justice and charity which are shown towards others. This, however, would be inconsistent with the Christian doctrine that the human personality must be respected in all, and that all without exception must be loved.

The best way to avoid hating enemies is to have no enemies in the first place. Therefore it is important to avoid quarreling which engenders enmities. "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and indignation, and clamor, and reviling, be removed from you, along with all malice" (Eph. 4:31). A little ill temper spoils the character just as a little wormwood spoils a jar of honey (Herm. *Mand.* 5, 1:5). Where there is strife, the Lord is absent (Ig. *Phil.* 8:1, Herm. *Sim.* 9, 32:2). The discernment of spirits is facilitated by the fact that the angel of wickedness is identified by ill temper (Herm. *Mand.* 6, 2:5). The sun should not be allowed to set upon one's anger (Eph. 4:26). It is hard for those who rage against one another to obtain forgiveness from the Lord (Herm. *Sim.* 9, 23:3).

To avoid quarrels one must guard the tongue. "Evil speaking is wicked. It is a restless devil, never making peace, but always dwelling in strife."<sup>120</sup> Jealousy must be avoided. It is a "wicked passion" (Clem. 63:2) which leads to death (Clem. 9:1) and betrays a lack of heavenly wisdom (Jas. 3:14-15). In the Messianic Kingdom "hatred shall be taken from the earth and along with jealousy it shall be drowned."<sup>121</sup> We must avoid rash judg-

<sup>120</sup>Herm. *Mand.* 2:3. See also Clem. 30-1; Ps.-Clem. 4:3; Apoc. Pet. (Eth.) 6.

<sup>121</sup>Od. Sol. 7:20. See also Clem. 4; Ps.-Clem. 4:3.

ment (Jas. 4:11-13) and root out of our hearts all unkind thoughts about our neighbors.<sup>122</sup>

The Christian's duty, then, is to live at peace with all men. "If it be possible, as far as in you lies, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). The form of this admonition implies that it is sometimes impossible, in spite of one's efforts, to maintain peace with others. Such indeed is a fact of common human experience. In this case it is the rule that Christians must love their enemies. "Love your enemies" (*Ep. Apost.* (Eth.) 18 (29)). "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."<sup>123</sup> The Christians were able to boast that they put this sublime doctrine into practice: "Christians love those who hate them" (*Ep. Diog.* 6:6). "They love all men and are persecuted by all men" (*Ep. Diog.* 5:11). "They do not rehearse speeches but exhibit good works; when struck they do not strike again; when robbed they do not go to law" (*Ath. Sup.* 11). Indeed, they not only renounced revenge but even returned good for evil. They exerted themselves to do good to their enemies (*Arist.* (Gr.) 15:5), "not rendering evil for evil, or abuse for abuse, but contrariwise, blessing" (I Pet. 3:9), they followed the doctrine of the Sermon on the Mount (*Ath. Sup.* 1). The greatest service the Christians could render their enemies was to pray for the latter's conversion and this they did. "We pray for our enemies, we try to win our unjust persecutors that those who shall follow the sublime precepts of Christ can hope for the same recompense as do we" (Just. I *Apol.* 14:3). "As for ourselves, we do not hate them; but, as is clear, we pity them and long for nothing but their repentance and their conversion" (Just. I *Apol.* 57:1). Christians pray that the Jews and those whom they have misled will find mercy in the sight of God (Just. *Dial.* 108:3).

From the preceding discussion certain facts stand out about the Roman attitude toward the underprivileged and the Christian attitude. The Romans had erected a legal framework which benefited the few but weighed heavily on the many. The

<sup>122</sup>Ig. *Tral.* 8:2; Herm. *Vis.* 2, 3:1 and 3, 6:3; Herm. *Sim.* 9, 23:3.

<sup>123</sup>Rom. 12:14. See also Rom. 12:17, 21; I Thess. 5:15; Just. I *Apol.* 15:9; *Theo.* 3:14.

doctrine of *patria potestas* made the father a despot within his own home. Easy divorce had degraded womanhood. Slaves were denied their human rights. It is true that custom and a sense of justice often made these legal provisions less unfair in practice than they were in theory. It is also true that during the period we are studying the laws themselves were being modified in a humanitarian sense. Yet the fact remains that under the early Empire whole classes were deprived of their fundamental rights.

More fundamental than this legal framework was the pagan attitude toward the human person. Pagan Rome had little respect for the dignity of man as such. Romans respected themselves, their own class, their own sex, their own race; but the idea that man *qua* man demanded respect was alien to them and Stoicism had done only a very little to improve matters.

The Christians left the legal framework undisturbed. There was nothing else they could do. But the Christians vigorously attacked the underlying attitude by their doctrine on the dignity of man. According to the Church's teaching, the human personality demanded respect always and everywhere. The unborn child, the slave, the alien, all had their rights and these rights must be scrupulously observed under all conditions. Christians not only preached this essentially democratic doctrine, they practised it. Thus they established a tradition which has been enormously influential ever since, even among those who will not acknowledge their debt to Christian thought.

