

## CHRISTIANITY VERSUS THE SERF

(By ARCHBISHOP REDWOOD.)

By proclaiming the equality of all in the sight of God, and in declaring the brotherhood of all in Christ, Christianity pointed out the remedy for the curse of slavery: and when it was stamped out of Europe the freed men were relieved from the degradation of personal dominion and placed in the position of self-independence: but they had not liberty as we now understand the term. The freedom rescued them from the dominion and caprice of a master and attached them to the soil with the obligation of rendering certain fixed services. This condition is called serfdom. An immense improvement on the state of slavery, it left, nevertheless, the laborer in a constrained position, and in estimating the work of Christianity in lessening the hardship of the serfs, we must ascertain their origin and condition. As the Romans extended their conquests they placed large estates, in different countries—Gaul, Asia Minor, Africa, etc.—under the control of wealthy Romans. It became difficult to cultivate such estates with ordinary slave labor. Hence it was thought advisable to assign portions of land to men, not actually slaves, who had been debtors, fugitives, or small land-owners in financial straits, and who were called *Coloni*. They owned the allotment or farm for life, on condition that they paid a proportion of the produce and gave a fixed number of days' labor on the part of the estate worked by slaves. They were forbidden either to leave the estate or to marry out of it, and their children belonged to the domain. No increase of rent or labor dues could be imposed upon them, they could undergo moderate punishment from the owner, and he could chain them in any attempt to escape. The two classes, *Coloni* and rustic slaves, working on the same estate, led to confusion, and in pagan times custom had a tendency to degrade the *Coloni* into slaves.

When Christianity effected the general emancipation of slaves the tendency changed, and slaves became *Coloni*: so that in course of time almost all the estate was worked by them. The estates of the Roman nobles disappeared in the downfall of the Roman Empire at the irruption of the barbarians. No permanent arrangement was possible in disturbed Europe for the succeeding 200 years. At the settlement due to Charlemagne the system of the Roman *Coloni* was adopted. While retaining fiscal rights over all the land he allotted to his princes and nobles large tracts in freehold, eventually divided into estates held in tenancy for life, with reversion to the freeholders at death. This reversion set the freeholder on the alert to prevent the estate from being depreciated and labor taken off: and so the serfs became attached to the land. In these lawless times the life tenants gradually asserted their independence, became proprietors, transmitted their holdings to their children, erected castles, and rendered only military homage to their liege lord. Thus arose the feudal system, which spread throughout the whole of Europe. Each grade owed service to a higher one, on account of the land, and the lowest grade was that of the laborer who belonged to the land, a portion of which he held on condition of certain fixed labor for the land.

The condition of the serf, or villein, varied much according to the amount of service and the harshness of its exaction. While the lord retained a part of the domain under his own cultivation the remainder was partly let to freemen and partly cultivated in allotment by the serfs. The unit of land in England was half an acre, and the serf held a greater or less number of half-acres. He had a house, with sheds for his pigs and cattle. He had a home; he could marry at his own choice within the domain; his children were not separated from him, but they belonged to the land.

The size of the serf's holdings regulated the number of days on which he had to work on the lord's farm without wages. A holding of 30 acres entailed about 125 days on which the serf went with his implements,

horses, or oxen to the steward, who set him to work at hay, corn, vineyard, etc. His wife looked to the poultry and eggs. He was free for the rest of the year to work on his own holding or to hire himself out for payment. He had no redress against his master by law, but custom gradually came to his protection regarding the kind and extent of service. He had a church and a priest in the village, and a school for his children, if he lived near a monastery. Under a generous and humane lord his condition was fairly tolerable. It was a vast advance on slavery, yet an exacting lord had scope for oppression and tyranny: for the serf had no remedy. Moreover, beyond labor dues the lord often imposed tolls and taxes for various pretexts—for instance, tolls for roads, fairs, markets: the serf was obliged to have his own corn ground at the lord's mill, his grapes crushed at the lord's wine-press, his bread baked at the lord's oven—all, of course, for a charge. Also the lord had exclusive right of sport, and fines and other exactions were inflicted. In lawless times, however, the serf was protected by his lord. In England at the time of the Domesday Book the serfs, including the villeins and cottiers, composed two-thirds of the population.

This system of serfdom lasted throughout Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries, and in some countries even until the present century. Christianity used its influence to soften the condition of the serf. Its first step was to assert the dignity of labor. At the rise of Christianity manual labor was despised as vile and base—worthy of slaves, unworthy of freemen. To-day we consider it degrading for a man to work like a beast of burden—harnessed to a cart or yoked to a plough. Similarly the ancients deemed it degrading for a man to work like a slave in any manual labor. Myriads of freemen in ancient Rome would starve rather than so work, and they were fed at the expense of the State. The most famous philosophers and writers spoke of labor with disdain, and called it a degradation, and this contempt of labor prevailed not only among the Romans, but well nigh through all countries east and west.

What a contrast to this universal contempt was the example of our Lord Jesus Christ! He chose a workman's condition, and as a carpenter He toiled with His Sacred Hands to support His Blessed Mother and His foster-father, St. Joseph. Significant also was His selection of workmen, fishers, tent-makers, for the preaching of His Gospel and the foundation of His Church. From the very outset Christianity emphatically proclaimed the dignity of labor. "We labor, working with our hands," says St. Paul (1 Cor., iv., 22), and "if any man will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Tim., iii., 10). That Apostle associated with workmen. "Because he was of the same trade he remained with them and wrought (now they were tent-makers by trade)." (Acts xviii., 3.) The pagans, scorning the primitive Christians because they worked, hated the advocates of the new theory that exalted labor. But as Christianity spread gradually the results of labor were appreciated. St. Augustine, in the fifth century speaks of societies of laymen, in Rome and Milan, presided over by a priest, and comprising men and women of every class, who worked with their hands for the Church and for the poor. Priests worked in the interval of their ministry. St. Hilary of Arles in the fifth century, and his clergy, worked all their lives at a trade for the poor in the diocese.

Throughout the period when the slave was passing on to liberty through the state of serfdom Christianity used a great rising power within it to assert the dignity of labor. That power was the monk. One of the greatest blessings conferred on society by monastic institutions was their rehabilitation of labor. No doubt their services in agriculture, learning, and civilisation were great, but greater still was the influence of their example in giving dignity to manual labor.

In the East, the deserts of Egypt, Arabia, Syria, and Palestine were peopled with monks. Men in every position of life fled from the corruption of ancient society to seek in the desert innocence and salvation.

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