Chapter II

THE RECONCILIATION WITH TIME

From the middle of the second century five names stand out—Montanus, Marcus Aurelius, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen. Together they prefigure a kind of reconciliation between the Church and the ordinary process of things, even though in one instance that prefiguring takes the shape of a more violent conflict. It would not be true to say that the Church consented to have her extraordinary supernatural graces driven underground; it would be truer to say that she made preparations for drawing into herself the whole of normal human existence. A change of method, an assent already in operation, became more marked. She suffered, she manipulated, she hierarchized, she intellectualized. All this she had done already, but now she entered upon it as a steady mode of behaviour.

In one instance the prefigured reconciliation took its opposite shape. In the year 161 Marcus Aurelius Antoninus ascended the Julian throne. Under that strenuous and ethical rationalist, persecution began to change. The self-consciousness of the Empire as regards Christians took, through the mind and person of the Emperor, a more deliberate form. What had been irritation, fury, riots of the blood, became a deliberate moral and intellectual effort. The pressure of Christendom on Rome had become too great. The Empire

determined to shake itself free from this troublesome delirium of its mind, this haunting disease of its body. The effort was deliberate and prolonged. "The persecutions under Marcus Aurelius extend throughout his reign. They were fierce and deliberate. . . . They had the Emperor's direct personal sanction. They break out in all parts of the Empire: in Rome, in Asia Minor, in Gaul, in Africa; possibly also in Byzantium."[1] The "good" Emperors had come to regard Christianity as an evil, as all tolerant and noble non-Christian minds tend to do. Partly, no doubt, the best Emperors had the highest idea of their duty to the safety of the State. But also they had the highest sense of moral balance and the least sense of the necessity of Redemption. The worse Emperors —Commodus, Heliogabalus—had a more superstitious impulse which was certainly more in accord with the asserted dogmas of the Gospel. Gods, and the nature of the Gods, are likely to be better understood by sinful than by stoical minds.

In Asia Polycarp, in Rome Justin Martyr, in Gaul Irenæus, and many more perished. With the names of such men is registered under Severus the name of a slave who not only endured martyrdom but in a sentence defined the Faith. Her name was Felicitas; she was Carthaginian; she lay in prison; there she bore a child. In her pain she screamed. The jailers asked her how, if she shrieked at *that*, she expected to endure death by the beasts. She said: "Now *I* suffer what *I* suffer; then another will be in me who will suffer for me, as I shall suffer for him." In that, Felicitas took her place for ever among the great African doctors of the Universal Church.

Against that persecution, as against those that followed, the Church opposed that supernatural loyalty. But it opposed

[1] Lightfoot: quoted by B. J. Kidd, *History of the Church.*

also the protestation of a profound natural loyalty. It not only allowed the Empire; it took refuge in the Empire; it felt the Empire as a protection even while it feared it as a peril. This had been so, in some sense, from the beginning. Rome had not only held off the Germans; it had postponed Antichrist. "The mystery of iniquity doth already work; only he who now letteth will let until he be taken out of the way. And then that shall that Wicked One be revealed." God, was thus in Rome itself, in the existence and order of Rome. While this world lasted, and in proportion as time became more and more a necessity of the Christian life, public order, the Republic, became of almost equivalent value. Just after the Aurelian persecution had failed and faded under the ignoble Commodus, Tertullian proclaimed again the value of that temporal salvation. In his *Book of Apology Against the Heathen* he declared that Christians, far from being suppressed, were everywhere. "Men say that the State is beset by them, that Christians are in their fields, their fortresses, their islands. They murmur that each sex, each age, every consideration and every rank is going over to this sect." He protested that the Lords of the Empire made no true examination of it; no, "you harshly pass sentence: The law forbids you to exist!"

Yet he (he said), with nearly all Christians, desired to live in the sanctity of Rome. "The end of time itself, threatening terrible and grievous things, is delayed because of the time allowed to the Roman Empire." "That which God hath willed is in the Emperors, and therefore we would have that which God hath willed kept secure." He protested that Christians though they might not pray to the Genius of the Emperor, might, should, and did pray for his "good health." Many non-Christian Romans, some Emperors, and probably Marcus Aurelius himself, thought definitely that the good

health of the Emperor was much more important than his Genius or his attributed Deity. Between the two moderate views there was much agreement. But their division was final. The Church, organizing itself for that process in time, had accepted the view that its members, like itself, would always have to live their lives on the basis of "faith." And the very condition of that faith was that Deity was single, supreme, and *different*. Without difference there was no Reconciliation. And Reconciliation was the supreme aim of faith.

Two things followed—perhaps inevitably followed—from that organization for process. The first was the disappearance of the extraordinary supernatural impulses. It may be that our Lord the Spirit discontinued them; one is almost driven to that view on observing how the Church discouraged them. The very nature of the Church involves the view that, apart from human sin, what happened was right. This certainly gives a great advantage in argument to any hostile, intelligent, and sceptical mind, but the belief can hardly be abandoned because of that intellectual inconvenience. Messias seems to have indicated that in the Church, as well as in daily life, the Blessed One will conform his actions—at least, to a degree—to the decisions of his creatures. If the Church determined on something, then that something should have been or should be true; and it is arguable that Messias was born of a pure Virgin as much because the Church would believe it as for any other reason—all things else being therefore made conformable. At any rate the prophecies and the liturgies of the Spirit began to disappear.

There was one rally. It took place about the same time as the Aurelian persecution, beginning in Phrygia and spreading. It was known as the Montanist heresy, after its founder

Montanus. And it is the first and last of such revolts against the habits of the Universal Church. It was the last because it was still definitely related to the actual life of the young Church; it was not an effort to return to something that had been lost for centuries. It was the last also in the sense that it was still privileged to encourage central doctrines in the Church. It was the first in the sense that it is followed by other movements, at later times, which attempted a similar austerity and a similar freedom. One might almost say that the defeat of Montanism exhibits the Church as an Institution more clearly than any other moment, and an Institution committed to reconciliation (not compromise) with ordinary men.

Montanism was, first of all, a highly rigorist movement. In morals, as in everything, there are two opposite tendencies. The first is to say: "Everything matters infinitely." The second is to say: "No doubt that is true. But mere sanity demands that we should not treat everything as mattering all that. Distinction is necessary; more-and-less is necessary; indifference is necessary." The contention is always sharp. The Rigorous view is vital to sanctity; the Relaxed view is vital to sanity. Their union is not impossible, but it is difficult; for whichever is in power begins, after the first five minutes, to maintain itself from bad and unworthy motives. Harshness, pride, resentment encourage the one; indulgence, falsity, detestable good-fellowship the other.

Between the two good (and evil) things the idea of what the Articles of the Church of England call "works of supererogation" had already emerged. "If thou do any good thing outside the commandments of God thou shalt win for thyself more exceeding glory," wrote Hermas. It is a difficult and dangerous proposition—not made easier by the rather violent

language of winning glory for oneself in which Hermas indulged. Yet the idea has lingered in the Church, and been half-formulated in the talk of the Way of the Commandments and the Way of the Counsels. The Christian doctrine has been that the demanded surrender to God must be entire, in which case there could hardly be anything supererogatory. Yet it has also been universally felt that there were, so to speak, acts of love and devotion which were not absolutely required. How can absolute surrender leave non-absolute potentialities? The answer seems largely to have lain in the doctrine of Vocation. Some were called to a strictness, some to a laxity. It naturally happened that strictness, being more difficult, was regarded as superior. So, as far as difficulty is concerned, it is; but so, as far as vocation is concerned, it is not. Relaxation is no less holy and proper than rigour, though perhaps it can hardly be preached so. But the lovely refreshments of this world in some may not be without their part in the lordly rigours of the others; the exchanges of Christendom are very deep; if we thrive by the force of the saints, they too may feed on our felicities. The life of the Redeemer is at the root of all; it is all within the Church, and (said the same Hermas, in a nobler style) "she was created before all things and for her sake the world was framed."

To us the most relaxed morals of the Church of the second century are austere enough. But to the Montanists the faithful seemed to have fallen away almost damnably from their duty. They proposed to revive original decency—much fasting, no second marriages, no kind of relation to the State (as, for example, in education). They took the sternest attitude towards sins committed after baptism. They refused to allow that any of the faithful might escape from persecution. They said, in effect, to the Church about ordinary life:

"Come out of her, my people." They denounced the normal life of Christians at the time as sacrilegious, profane, and idolatrous. The normal Christians with less cause and as much heat retaliated. They even, to justify themselves, invented romantic details against the Montanists—such as child-murder and a cannibal Eucharist. The normal calumnies of piety flew to and fro, encouraged by two other differences in stress.

The first concerned the Prophets. The direct inspiration of the Spirit had, as usual, given rise to abuses. The oracles were paid for, a thing harmless enough in itself, since money also is a medium of exchange, but perilous. Priests might be, though in fact they usually were not, paid; they had their appointed job. But it was of the essence of the prophetic ministry that contract could not exist, nor control; the Spirit acted *proprio motu*. Contract and control belonged to the early developed hieratic ministry of the Church. There, indeed, in the whole business of the sacraments which began when the Church began, the Lord deigned to commit himself to the hands of men, and to fulfil his agreement at their demand. The prophet at the end of the first century remained only "here and there, a much venerated but solitary personage."

His office, in fact, had changed. The Prophecy had once been "a Voice conveying an immediate revelation; to Polycarp, as to Origen, it is an interpretative power, which discovers beneath the literal sense of Scripture mysteries which are not visible to the eye of mere common sense." It had moved from the meeting house to the study, though there it still had disciples. Something was, no doubt, lost; something gained. But there it is; in general it had moved. The Montanists proposed to bring it back. They were orthodox; they kept the sacerdotal system—the Orders and the Formulæ.

But they proposed to "enliven" these (no doubt, even then, with some cause) by subordinating them to the prophetic office and the inspired utterance. They even went further; they developed a grand principle. They were orthodox on the Nature of Christ; they were said to have been the first to use the word *homo-ousion, of the same nature*, presently to be of such import to the Church. But they possessed a special devotion to the Person of that Spirit by whom the prophets spoke. They asserted that his special age and dispensation had already begun. They are said to have been the first to call him God; if so, he permitted himself to be named in schism and defined by an error. They declared that he exhibited his moral scrupulousness by their conduct and his will by their prophets. On the general wrangle the Montanists were defeated; the prophets disappeared; morality was eased. The Universal Church secured a tenderness for men and preserved the contract with God. But it must be admitted that the Holy Spirit remained God.

Thus while on the one hand the Church declared the loyalty and claimed the protection of citizenship, on the other it organized itself into a regular and reliable method. It refused (if the phrase may be allowed) the irresponsible outbreaks and the moral extremism of the Holy Ghost for the established formulæ and the moral discipline of Messias. It had already established that system of Penance which is the only system of judgment ending, and meant to end, only in forgiveness. Sins were not to be forgotten; they were to be remembered. In those parts of Christendom where sacramental confession is not practised, the practice of confession to God has yet been retained. The fault, the failing, is to be offered to God: grace demands that everything should be recollected by man, as to God everything is present.