

Christianity in Gaul

This article is taken from **The History of France**, by Maurice Guizot, Chapter 6, *Establishment of Christianity in Gaul*.

This brief account of how the Lord moved men and women of faith to spread the message of Christ to the countries of France, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and others, is an amazing testimony to the grace of God and the constancy of the believers' faith. Also very interesting are the descriptions of the two main heathen religions in Gaul, Roman paganism and Druidism; and Guizot presents a good comparison of these with Christianity.

When Christianity began to penetrate into Gaul, it encountered there two religions very different one from the other, and infinitely more different from the Christian religion; these were Druidism and Paganism-- hostile one to the other, but with a hostility political only, and unconnected with those really religious questions that Christianity was coming to raise.

Druidism, considered as a religion, was a mass of confusion, wherein the instinctive notions of the human race concerning the origin and destiny of the world and of mankind were mingled with the Oriental dreams of metempsychosis--that pretended transmigration, at successive periods, of immortal souls into divers creatures. This confusion was worse confounded by traditions borrowed from the mythologies of the East and the North, by shadowy remnants of a symbolical worship paid to the material forces of nature, and by barbaric practices, such as human sacrifices, in honor of the gods or of the dead. People who are without the scientific development of language and the art of writing do not attain to systematic and productive religious creeds. There is nothing to show that, from the first appearance of the Gauls in history to their struggle with victorious Rome, the religious influence of Druidism had caused any notable progress to be made in Gallic manners and civilization. A general and strong, but vague and incoherent, belief in the immortality of the soul was its noblest characteristic. But with the religious elements, at the same time coarse and mystical, were united two facts of importance: the Druids formed a veritable ecclesiastical corporation, which had, throughout Gallic society, fixed attributes, special manners and

customs, an existence at the same time distinct and national; and in the wars with Rome this corporation became the most faithful representatives and the most persistent defenders of Gallic independence and nationality. The Druids were far more a clergy than Druidism was a religion; but it was an organized and a patriotic clergy. It was especially on this account that they exercised in Gaul an influence which was still existent, particularly in north-western Gaul, at the time when Christianity reached the Gallic provinces of the south and centre.

The Greco-Roman Paganism was, at this time, far more powerful than Druidism in Gaul, and yet more lukewarm and destitute of all religious vitality. It was the religion of the conquerors and of the state, and was invested, in that quality, with real power; but, beyond that, it had but the power derived from popular customs and superstitions. As a religious creed, the Latin Paganism was at bottom empty, indifferent, and inclined to tolerate all religions in the state, provided only that they, in their turn, were indifferent at any rate towards itself, and that they did not come troubling the state, either by disobeying her rulers or by attacking her old deities, dead and buried beneath their own still standing altars.

Such were the two religions with which, in Gaul, nascent Christianity had to contend. Compared with them it was, to all appearance, very small and very weak; but it was provided with the most efficient weapons for fighting and beating them, for it had exactly the moral forces which they lacked. Christianity, instead of being, like Druidism, a religion exclusively national and hostile to all that was foreign, proclaimed a universal religion, free from all local and national partiality, addressing itself to all men in the name of the same God, and offering to all the same salvation. It is one of the strangest and most significant facts in history, that the religion most universally human, most dissociated from every consideration but that of the rights and well-being of the human race in its entirety--that such a religion, be it repeated, should have come forth from the womb of the most exclusive, most rigorously and obstinately national religion that ever appeared in the world, that is, Judaism. Such, nevertheless, was the birth of Christianity; and this wonderful contrast between the essence and the earthly origin of Christianity was without doubt one of its most powerful attractions and most efficacious means of success.

Against Paganism Christianity was armed with moral forces not a whit less great. Confronting mythological traditions and poetical or philosophical allegories, appeared a religion truly religious, concerned solely with the relations of mankind to God and with their eternal future. To the pagan indifference of the Roman world the Christians opposed the profound conviction of their faith, and not only their firmness in defending it against all powers and all dangers, but also their ardent passion for propagating it without any motive but the yearning to make their fellows share in its benefits and its hopes. They confronted, nay, they welcomed martyrdom, at one time to maintain their own Christianity, at another to make others Christians around them; propagandizing was for them a duty almost as imperative as fidelity. And it was not in memory of old and obsolete mythologies, but in the name of recent deeds and persons, in obedience to laws proceeding from God, One and Universal, in fulfillment and continuation of a contemporary and superhuman history,—that of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man,—that the Christians of the first two centuries labored to convert to their faith the whole Roman world. Marcus Aurelius was contemptuously astonished at what he called the obstinacy of the Christians; he knew not from what source these nameless heroes drew a strength superior to his own, though he was at the same time emperor and sage. It is impossible to assign with exactness the date of the first footprints and first labors of Christianity in Gaul. It was not, however, from Italy, nor in the Latin tongue and through Latin writers, but from the East and through the Greeks, that it first came and began to spread. Marseilles—and the different Greek colonies, originally from Asia Minor and settled upon the shores of the Mediterranean or along the Rhone, mark the route and were the places whither the first Christian missionaries carried their teaching: on this point the letters of the Apostles and the writings of the first two generations of their disciples are clear and abiding proof. In the west of the empire, especially in Italy, the Christians at their first appearance were confounded with the Jews, and comprehended under the same name: "The Emperor Claudius," says Suetonius, "drove from Rome (A.D. 52) the Jews who, at the instigation of Christus, were in continual commotion." After the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus (A.D. 71), the Jews, Christian or not, dispersed throughout the Empire; but the Christians were not slow to

signalize themselves by their religious fervor, and to come forward everywhere under their own true name. Lyons became the chief centre of Christian preaching and association in Gaul. As early as the first half of the second century there existed there a Christian congregation, regularly organized as a church, and already sufficiently important to be in intimate and frequent communication with the Christian Churches of the East and West. There is a tradition, generally admitted, that St. Pothinus, the first Bishop of Lyons, was sent thither from the East by the Bishop of Smyrna, St. Polycarp, himself a disciple of St. John. One thing is certain, that the Christian Church of Lyons produced Gaul's first martyrs, amongst whom was the Bishop, St. Pothinus.

It was under Marcus Aurelius, the most philosophical and most conscientious of the emperors, that there was enacted for the first time in Gaul, against nascent Christianity, that scene of tyranny and barbarity which was to be renewed so often and during so many centuries in the midst of Christendom itself. In the eastern provinces of the Empire and in Italy the Christians had already been several times persecuted, now with cold-blooded cruelty, now with some slight hesitation and irresolution. Nero had caused them to be burned in the streets of Rome, accusing them of the conflagration himself had kindled, and, a few months before his fall, St. Peter and St. Paul had undergone martyrdom at Rome. Domitian had persecuted and put to death Christians even in his own family, and though invested with the honors of the consulate. Righteous Trajan, when consulted by Pliny the Younger on the conduct he should adopt in Bithynia towards the Christians, had answered, "It is impossible, in this sort of matter, to establish any certain general rule; there must be no quest set on foot against them, and no unsigned indictment must be accepted; but if they be accused and convicted, they must be punished." To be punished, it sufficed that they were convicted of being Christians; and it was Trajan himself who condemned St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, to be brought to Rome and thrown to the beasts, for the simple reason that he was highly Christian. Marcus Aurelius, not only by virtue of his philosophical conscientiousness, but by reason of an incident in his history, seemed bound to be farther than any other from persecuting the Christians. During one of his campaigns on the Danube, A.D. 174, his army was suffering cruelly from fatigue and thirst; and at

the very moment when they were on the point of engaging in a great battle against the barbarians, the rain fell in abundance, refreshed the Roman soldiers, and conduced to their victory. There was in the Roman army a legion, the twelfth, called the *Melitone* or the *Thundering*, which bore on its roll many Christian soldiers. They gave thanks for the rain and the victory to the one omnipotent God who had heard their prayers, whilst the pagans rendered like honor to Jupiter, the rain-giver and the thunderer. The report about these Christians got spread abroad and gained credit in the Empire, so much so that there was attributed to Marcus Aurelius a letter, in which, by reason, no doubt, of this incident, he forbade persecution of the Christians. Tertullian, a contemporary witness, speaks of this letter in perfect confidence; and the Christian writers of the following century did not hesitate to regard it as authentic. Nowadays a strict examination of its existing text does not allow such a character to be attributed to it. At any rate the persecutions of the Christians were not forbidden, for in the year 177, that is, only three years after the victory of Marcus Aurelius over the Germans, there took place, undoubtedly by his orders, the persecution which caused at Lyons the first Gallic martyrdom. This was the fourth, or, according to others, the fifth great imperial persecution of the Christians.

Most tales of the martyrs were written long after the event, and came to be nothing more than legends laden with details often utterly puerile or devoid of proof. The martyrs of Lyons in the second century wrote, so to speak, their own history; for it was their comrades, eye-witnesses of their sufferings and their virtue, who gave an account of them in a long letter addressed to their friends in Asia Minor, and written with passionate sympathy and pious prolixity, but bearing all the characteristics of truth. It seems desirable to submit for perusal that document, which has been preserved almost entire in the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in the third century, and which will exhibit, better than any modern representations, the state of facts and of souls in the midst of the imperial persecutions, and the mighty faith, devotion, and courage with which the early Christians faced the most cruel trials.

"The servants of Christ, dwelling at Vienne and Lyons in Gaul, to the brethren settled in Asia and Phrygia, who have the same faith and hope of

redemption that we have, peace, grace, and glory from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord!

"None can tell to you in speech or fully set forth to you in writing the weight of our misery, the madness and rage of the Gentiles against the saints, and all that hath been suffered by the blessed martyrs. Our enemy doth rush upon us with all the fury of his powers, and already giveth us a foretaste and the first-fruits of all the license with which he doth intend to set upon us. He hath omitted nothing for the training of his agents against us, and he doth exercise them in a sort of preparatory work against the servants of the Lord. Not only are we driven from the public buildings, from the baths, and from the forum, but it is forbidden to all our people to appear publicly in any place whatsoever.

"The grace of God hath striven for us against the devil: at the same time that it hath sustained the weak, it hath opposed to the Evil One, as it were, pillars of strength--men strong and valiant, ready to draw on themselves all his attacks. They have had to bear all manner of insult; they have deemed but a small matter that which others find hard and terrible; and they have thought only of going to Christ, proving by their example that the sufferings of this world are not worthy to be put in the balance with the glory which is to be manifested in us. They have endured, in the first place, all the outrages that could be heaped upon them by the multitude, outcries, blows, thefts, spoliation, stoning, imprisonment, all that the fury of the people could devise against hated enemies. Then, dragged to the forum by the military tribune and the magistrates of the city, they have been questioned before the people and cast into prison until the coming of the governor. He, from the moment our people appeared before him, committed all manner of violence against them. Then stood forth one of our brethren, Vettius Epagathus, full of love towards God and his neighbor, living a life so pure and strict that, young as he was, men held him to be the equal of the aged Zacharias.-- He could not bear that judgment so unjust should go forth against us, and, moved with indignation, he asked leave to defend his brethren, and to prove that there was in them no kind of irreligion or impiety. Those present at the tribunal, amongst whom he was known and celebrated, cried out against him, and the governor himself, enraged at so just a demand, asked him no more than this question, 'Art thou a Christian?' Straightway with a loud voice, he

declared himself a Christian, and was placed amongst the number of the martyrs. . . .

"Afterwards the rest began to be examined and classed. The first, firm and well prepared, made hearty and solemn confession of their faith. Others, ill prepared and with little firmness, showed that they lacked strength for such a fight. About ten of them fell away, which caused us incredible pain and mourning. Their example broke down the courage of others, who, not being yet in bonds, though they had already had much to suffer, kept close to the martyrs, and withdrew not out of their sight. Then were we all stricken with dread for the issue of the trial: not that we had great fear of the torments inflicted, but because, prophesying the result according to the degree of courage of the accused, we feared much falling away. They took, day by day, those of our brethren who were worthy to replace the weak; so that all the best of the two churches, those whose care and zeal had founded them, were taken and confined. They took, likewise, some of our slaves, for the governor had ordered that they should be all summoned to attend in public; and they, fearing the torments they saw the saints undergo, and instigated by the soldiers, accused us falsely of odious deeds, such as the banquet of Thyestes, the incest of Oedipus, and other crimes which must not be named or even thought of, and which we cannot bring ourselves to believe that men were ever guilty of. These reports having once spread amongst the people, even those persons who had hitherto, by reason, perhaps, of relationship, shown moderation towards us, burst forth into bitter indignation against our people. Thus was fulfilled that which had been prophesied by the Lord: 'The time cometh when whosoever shall kill you shall think that he doeth God service.' Since that day the holy martyrs have suffered tortures that no words can express.

"The fury of the multitude, of the governor, and of the soldiers, fell chiefly upon Sanctus, a deacon of Vienne; upon Maturus, a neophyte still, but already a valiant champion of Christ; upon Attalus also, born at Pergamus, but who hath ever been one of the pillars of our Church; upon Blandina, lastly, in whom Christ hath made it appear that persons who seem vile and despised of men are just those whom God holds in the highest honor by reason of the excellent love they bear Him, which is manifested in their firm virtue, and not in vain show. All of us, and even Blandina's mistress here below, who fought valiantly with the other martyrs, feared that

this poor slave, so weak of body, would not be in a condition to freely confess her faith; but she was sustained by such vigor of soul that the executioners, who from morn till eve put her to all manner of torture, failed in their efforts, and declared themselves beaten, not knowing what further punishment to inflict, and marveling that she still lived, with her body pierced through and through, and torn piecemeal by so many tortures, of which a single one should have sufficed to kill her. But that blessed saint, like a valiant athlete, took fresh courage and strength from the confession of her faith; all feeling of pain vanished, and ease returned to her at the mere utterance of the words, 'I am a Christian, and no evil is wrought amongst us.'

"As for Sanctus, the executioners hoped that in the midst of the tortures inflicted upon him--the most atrocious which man could devise--they would hear him say something unseemly or unlawful; but so firmly did he resist them, that, without even saying his name, or that of his nation or city, or whether he was bond or free, he only replied in the Roman tongue, to all questions, 'I am a Christian.' Therein was, for him, his name, his country, his condition, his whole being; and never could the Gentiles wrest from him another word. The fury of the governor and the executioners was redoubled against him; and, not knowing how to torment him further, they applied to his most tender members bars of red-hot iron. His members burned; but he, upright and immovable, persisted in his profession of faith, as if living waters from the bosom of Christ flowed over him and refreshed him. . . . Some days after, these infidels began again to torture him, believing that if they inflicted upon his blistering wounds the same agonies, they would triumph over him, who seemed unable to bear the mere touch of their hands; and they hoped, also, that the sight of this torturing alive would terrify his comrades. But, contrary to general expectation, the body of Sanctus, rising suddenly up, stood erect and firm amidst these repeated torments, and recovered its old appearance and the use of its members, as if, by Divine grace, this second laceration of his flesh had caused healing rather than suffering. . . .

"When the tyrants had thus expended and exhausted their tortures against the firmness of the martyrs sustained by Christ, the devil devised other contrivances. They were cast into the darkest and most unendurable place in their prison; their feet were dragged out and compressed to the utmost tension of the muscles; the jailers, as if instigated by

a demon, tried every sort of torture, insomuch that several of them, for whom God willed such an end, died of suffocation in prison. Others, who had been tortured in such a manner that it was thought impossible they should long survive, deprived as they were of every remedy and aid from men, but supported nevertheless by the grace of God, remained sound and strong in body as in soul, and comforted and reanimated their brethren. . . .

"The blessed Pothinus, who held at that time the bishopric of Lyons, being upwards of ninety, and so weak in body that he could hardly breathe, was himself brought before the tribunal, so worn with old age and sickness that he seemed nigh to extinction; but he still possessed his soul, wherewith to serve the triumph of Christ. Being brought by the soldiers before the tribunal, whither he was accompanied by all the magistrates of the city and the whole populace, that pursued him with hootings, he offered, as if he had been the very Christ, the most glorious testimony. At a question from the governor, who asked what the God of the Christians was, he answered, 'If thou be worthy, thou shalt know.' He was immediately raised up, without any respect or humanity, and blows were showered upon him; those who happened to be nearest to him assaulted him grievously with foot and fist, without the slightest regard for his age; those who were farther off cast at him whatever was to their hand; they would all have thought themselves guilty of the greatest default if they had not done their best, each on his own score, to insult him brutally. They believed they were avenging the wrongs of their gods. Pothinus, still breathing, was cast again into prison, and two days after yielded up his spirit.

"Then were manifested a singular dispensation of God and the immeasurable compassion of Jesus Christ; an example rare amongst brethren, but in accord with the intentions and the justice of the Lord. All those who, at their first arrest, had denied their faith, were themselves cast into prison and given over to the same sufferings as the other martyrs, for their denial did not serve them at all. Those who had made profession of being what they really were--that is, Christians--were imprisoned without being accused of other crimes. The former, on the contrary, were confined as homicides and wretches, thus suffering a double punishment. The one sort found repose in the honorable joys of martyrdom, in the hope of promised blessedness, in the love of Christ, and in the spirit of God the Father; the other were a prey to the reproaches of

conscience. It was easy to distinguish the one from the other by their looks. The one walked joyously, bearing on their faces a majesty mingled with sweetness, and their very bonds seemed unto them an ornament, even as the broidery that decks a bride . . . the other, with downcast eyes and humble and dejected air, were an object of contempt to the Gentiles themselves, who regarded them as cowards who had forfeited the glorious and saving name of Christians. And so they who were present at this double spectacle were thereby signally strengthened, and whoever amongst them chanced to be arrested confessed the faith without doubt or hesitation. . . .

"Things having come to this pass, different kinds of death were inflicted on the martyrs, and they offered to God a crown of divers flowers. It was but right that the most valiant champions, those who had sustained a double assault and gained a signal victory, should receive a splendid crown of immortality. The neophyte Maturus and the deacon Sanctus, with Blandina and Attalus, then, were led into the amphitheatre, and thrown to the beasts, as a sight to please the inhumanity of the Gentiles. . . . Maturus and Sanctus there underwent all kinds of tortures, as if they had hitherto suffered nothing; or, rather, like athletes who had already been several times victorious, and were contending for the crown of crowns, they braved the stripes with which they were beaten, the bites of the beasts that dragged them to and fro, and all that was demanded by the outcries of an insensate mob, so much the more furious, because it could by no means overcome the firmness of the martyrs or extort from Sanctus any other speech than that which, on the first day, he had uttered: 'I am a Christian.'

"After this fearful contest, as life was not extinct, their throats were at last cut, when they alone had thus been offered as a spectacle to the public instead of the variety displayed in the combat of gladiators. Blandina, in her turn, tied to a stake, was given to the beasts: she was seen hanging, as it were, on a sort of cross, calling upon God with trustful fervor, and the brethren present were reminded, in the person of a sister, of Him who had been crucified for their salvation. . . . As none of the beasts would touch the body of Blandina, she was released from the stake, taken back to prison, and reserved for another occasion. . . . Attalus, whose execution, seeing that he was a man of mark, was furiously demanded by the people, came forward ready to brave everything, as a man deriving

confidence from the memory of his life, for he had courageously trained himself to discipline, and had always amongst us borne witness for the truth. He was led all round the amphitheatre, preceded by a board bearing this inscription in Latin: 'This is Attalus the Christian.' The people pursued him with the most furious hootings; but the governor, having learnt that he was a Roman citizen, had him taken back to prison with the rest. Having subsequently written to Caesar, he waited for his decision as to those who were thus detained.

"This delay was neither useless nor unprofitable, for then shone forth the boundless compassion of Christ. Those of the brethren who had been but dead members of the Church, were recalled to life by the pains and help of the living; the martyrs obtained grace for those who had fallen away; and great was the joy in the Church, at the same time virgin and mother, for she once more found living those whom she had given up for dead. Thus revived and strengthened by the goodness of God, who willeth not the death of the sinner, but rather inviteth him to repentance, they presented themselves before the tribunal, to be questioned afresh by the governor. Caesar had replied that they who confessed themselves to be Christians should be put to the sword, and they who denied sent away safe and sound. When the time for the great market had fully come, there assembled a numerous multitude from every nation and every province. The governor had the blessed martyrs brought up before his judgment-seat, showing them before the people with all the pomp of a theatre. He questioned them afresh; and those who were discovered to be Roman citizens were beheaded, the rest were thrown to the beasts.

"Great glory was gained for Christ by means of those who had at first denied their faith, and who now confessed it contrary to the expectation of the Gentiles. Those who, having been privately questioned, declared themselves Christians were added to the number of the martyrs. Those in whom appeared no vestige of faith, and no fear of God, remained without the pale of the Church. When they were dealing with those who had been reunited to it, one Alexander, a Phrygian by nation, a physician by profession, who had for many years been dwelling in Gaul, a man well known to all for his love of God and open preaching of the faith, took his place in the hall of judgment, exhorting by signs all who filled it to confess their faith, even as if he had been called in to deliver them of it. The

multitude, enraged to see that those who had at first denied, turned round and proclaimed their faith, cried out against Alexander, whom they accused of the conversion. The governor forthwith asked him what he was, and at the answer, 'I am a Christian,' condemned him to the beasts. On the morrow Alexander was again brought up, together with Attalus, whom the governor, to please the people, had once more condemned to the beasts. After they had both suffered in the amphitheatre all the torments that could be devised, they were put to the sword. Alexander uttered not a complaint, not a word; he had the air of one who was talking inwardly with God. Attalus, seated on an iron seat, and waiting for the fire to consume his body, said, in Latin, to the people, 'See what ye are doing; it is in truth devouring men; as for us, we devour not men, and we do no evil at all.' He was asked what was the name of God: 'God,' said he, 'is not like us mortals; He hath no name.'

"After all these martyrs, on the last day of the shows, Blandina was again brought up, together with a young lad, named Ponticus, about fifteen years old. They had been brought up every day before that they might see the tortures of their brethren. When they were called upon to swear by the altars of the Gentiles, they remained firm in their faith, making no account of those pretended gods, and so great was the fury of the multitude against them, that no pity was shown for the age of the child or the sex of the woman. Tortures were heaped upon them; they were made to pass through every kind of torment, but the desired end was not gained. Supported by the exhortations of his sister, who was seen and heard by the Gentiles, Ponticus, after having endured all magnanimously, gave up the ghost. Blandina, last of all,--like a noble mother that hath roused the courage of her sons for the fight, and sent them forth to conquer for their king,--passed once more through all the tortures they had suffered, anxious to go and rejoin them, and rejoicing at each step towards death. At length, after she had undergone fire, the talons of beasts, and agonizing aspersion, she was wrapped in a network and thrown to a bull that tossed her in the air; she was already unconscious of all that befell her, and seemed altogether taken up with watching for the blessings that Christ had in store for her. Even the Gentiles allowed that never a woman had suffered so much or so long.

"Still their fury and their cruelty towards the saints were not appeased. They devised another way of

raging against them; they cast to the dogs the bodies of those who had died of suffocation in prison, and watched night and day that none of our brethren might come and bury them. As for what remained of the martyrs' half-mangled or devoured corpses, they left them exposed under a guard of soldiers, coming to look on them with insulting eyes, and saying, 'Where is now their God? Of what use to them was this religion for which they laid down their lives?' We were overcome with grief that we were not able to bury these poor corpses; nor the darkness of night, nor gold, nor prayers could help us to succeed therein. After being thus exposed for six days in the open air, given over to all manner of outrage, the corpses of the martyrs were at last burned, reduced to ashes, and cast hither and thither by the infidels upon the waters of the Rhone, that there might be left no trace of them on earth. They acted as if they had been more mighty than God, and could rob our brethren of their resurrection: 'It's in that hope,' said they, 'that these folk bring amongst us a new and strange religion, that they set at nought the most painful torments, and that they go joyfully to face death: let us see if they will rise again, if their God will come to their aid and will be able to tear them from our hands.'"

It is not without a painful effort that, even after so many centuries, we can resign ourselves to be witnesses, in imagination only, of such a spectacle. We can scarce believe that amongst men of the same period and the same city so much ferocity could be displayed in opposition to so much courage, the passion for barbarity against the passion for virtue. Nevertheless, such is history; and it should be represented as it really was: first of all, for truth's sake; then for the due appreciation of virtue and all it costs of effort and sacrifice; and, lastly, for the purpose of showing what obstacles have to be surmounted, what struggles endured, and what sufferings borne, when the question is the accomplishment of great moral and social reforms. Marcus Aurelius was, without any doubt, a virtuous ruler, and one who had it in his heart to be just and humane; but he was an absolute ruler, that is to say, one fed entirely on his own ideas, very ill-informed about the facts on which he had to decide, and without a free public to warn him of the errors of his ideas or the practical results of his decrees. He ordered the persecution of the Christians without knowing what the Christians were, or what the persecution would be, and this conscientious philosopher let loose at Lyons, against the most

conscientious of subjects, the zealous servility of his agents, and the atrocious passions of the mob.

The persecution of the Christians did not stop at Lyons, or with Marcus Aurelius; it became, during the third century, the common practice of the emperors in all parts of the Empire: from A.D. 202 to 312, under the reigns of Septimius Severus, Maximinus the First, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, Diocletian, Maximian, and Galerius, there are reckoned six great general persecutions, without counting others more circumscribed or less severe. The Emperors Alexander Severus, Philip the Arabian, and Constantius Chlorus were almost the only exceptions to this cruel system; and nearly always, wherever it was in force, the Pagan mob, in its brutality or fanatical superstition, added to imperial rigor its own atrocious and cynical excesses.

But Christian zeal was superior in perseverance and efficacy to Pagan persecution. St. Pothinus the Martyr was succeeded as bishop at Lyons by St. Irenaeus, the most learned, most judicious, and most illustrious of the early heads of the Church in Gaul. Originally from Asia Minor, probably from Smyrna, he had migrated to Gaul, at what particular date is not known, and had settled as a simple priest in the diocese of Lyons, where it was not long before he exercised vast influence, as well on the spot as also during certain missions intrusted to him, and amongst them one, they say, to the Pope St. Eleutherius at Rome. Whilst Bishop of Lyons, from A.D. 177 to 202, he employed the five and twenty years in propagating the Christian faith in Gaul, and in defending, by his writings, the Christian doctrines against the discord to which they had already been subjected in the East, and which was beginning to penetrate to the West. In 202, during the persecution instituted by Septimius Severus, St. Irenaeus crowned by martyrdom his active and influential life. It was in his episcopate that there began what may be called the swarm of Christian missionaries who, towards the end of the second and during the third centuries, spread over the whole of Gaul, preaching the faith and forming churches. Some went from Lyons at the instigation of St. Irenaeus; others from Rome, especially under the pontificate of Pope St. Fabian, himself martyred in 219; St. Felix and St. Fortunatus to Valence, St. Ferreol to Besancon, St. Marcellus to Chalons-sur-Saone, St. Benignus to Dijon, St. Trophimus to Arles, St. Paul to Narbonne, St. Saturninus to Toulouse, St. Martial to Limoges, St. Andeol and

St. Privatus to the Cevennes, St. Austremoine to Clermont-Ferrand, St. Gatian to Tours, St. Denis to Paris, and so many others that their names are scarcely known beyond the pages of erudite historians, or the very spots where they preached, struggled, and conquered, often at the price of their lives. Such were the founders of the faith and of the Christian Church in France. At the commencement of the fourth century their work was, if not accomplished, at any rate triumphant; and when, A.D. 312, Constantine declared himself a Christian, he confirmed the fact of the conquest of the Roman world, and of Gaul in particular, by Christianity. No doubt the majority of the inhabitants were not as yet Christians; but it was clear that the Christians were in the ascendant and had command of the future. Of the two grand elements which were to meet together, on the ruins of Roman society, for the formation of modern society, the moral element, the Christian religion, had already taken possession of souls; the devastated territory awaited the coming of new peoples, known to history under the general name of Germans, whom the Romans called the barbarians.
