CHAPTER EIGHT

FOURTH CENTURY WATERSHEDS

"God, seeing himself contemned by our nature, out of his goodness has handed it over to certain princes to correct it... Because of our depravity there was need of government."

St. John Chrysostom, Sermo in Genesim, 4, 2.

Examination of the economic problem by the Christian Fathers of Late Antiquity was undertaken in a context which differed substantially from that of their predecessors. After Constantine, the Roman Empire remained nominally pluralistic with respect to religious belief and observance. However, the Emperors (with the notable exception of Julian the Apostate, 360-363) remained committed to the Christian cause and discriminated accordingly. The old aristocratic families, which dominated the senate at Rome, clung to paganism and represented a countervailing political force, at least to the end of the fourth century. This force was of some significance in the Western Empire for a time, but had little or no viability in the East.¹

Another new factor conditioning the thought of the later Fathers was economic decline. The roots of that decline extend well back beyond the accession of Constantine, and it may be traced to trends that were becoming apparent in the closing decades of the second century.² Early Christian Emperors, however, displayed no capacity to reverse those trends, so conditions in many regional economies continued to worsen throughout the fourth and fifth centuries.

A third important element in the foundations of later patristic economic thought was the phenomenon of monasticism. This phenomenon emerged partly as the result of economic deprivation and of an imperial order with which the life of the Church was becoming increasingly identified. Monasticism inspired some of the Fathers to seek for a set of economic relationships other than that which pertained conventionally as part of the fabric of Empire.

Christian Responsibility

Constantine's adoption of Christianity presented the Church with a range of issues which it had not been obliged to meet previously. As Arnold Jones has remarked: "It was difficult for Christians to adjust their ideas when under Constantine, the government became Christian ... The Church had never had to face the moral problems of a Christian placed in a position of secular authority, and on some very elementary points it was still in doubt almost a century after Constantine's conversion."³ Some Christians were now in a position to exercise social responsibility on an unprecedented scale. They could tread the corridors of power and shape the future of the society within which they had been merely a reactive group hitherto.

What was the model for action on the political plane? Here, the New Testament appeared to offer little that encouraged a positive response to the new opportunity. "It has always been difficult," writes Elizabeth Isichei, "to extract any unequivocal political doctrine from the recorded sayings of Jesus ... For this reason, the political attitudes of later Christians were very largely determined by the views of Paul, whose injunction to the Romans to be subject to the 'powers that be' was probably the most influential pronouncement in the history of political thought."⁴ Further, political action for social reform was discouraged by the view that government was a matter for the imperium, and obedience to its directives was mandatory. Geza Alfoldy states: "Disobedience to the ruler was regarded not only as a criminal act but as sacrilege ... the emperor, even on the Christian view, was the chosen one to who summa divinitas transferred the government of all things on earth."⁵

The idea that Christians might take responsibility for the fate of the Empire was also diffused by a certain euphoria surrounding Constantine's conversion. Among the Fathers, Eusebius of Caesarea (265-337) was prominent in the expression of that euphoria. For Eusebius, "the kingdom and empire of Constantine is resplendent as an image of the kingdom of heaven."⁶ It has been contended that Eusebius' view of

⁵ G. Alfoldy, The Social History of Rome (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 188.