CHAPTER TEN

STOICISM AND AGRICULTURE

"God did not make the sea to be sailed over, but for the sake of the beauty of the element... The sea is given to supply you with fish to eat, not for you to endanger yourself upon it; use it for purposes of food, not for purposes of commerce."

St. Ambrose of Milan, De Elia

Saint Ambrose of Milan (339-397) left an indelible mark on socioeconomic thought in the West. His Christian beliefs were combined with a great reverence for certain of the old Roman traditions, and he was able to offer a viable Western counterpart to the social thought that was emanating from the Fathers of the East. Through the centuries, aspects of Ambrose's work have provided influential conduits through which the ideas of some pre-Christian thinkers, notably Cicero (106-44 B.C.), have flowed on into the mainstream of European Christianity. Homes Dudden writes that,

"it is owing to his (Ambrose's) natural affinity with Stoicism that so much of the old Stoic morality became incorporated, first, in his own treatise, then through that treatise in the ethics of the Middle Ages, and finally in the common thought of Christendom at the present day." 1

The impact of the "treatise" in question, namely, De officiis ministrorum has been remarked by Edwin Hatch who observes that Ambrose's book, "is a rechauffee of the book which Cicero had compiled more than three centuries before, chiefly from Panaetius. It is Stoical, not only in conception, but also in detail... The ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, which the earliest Christian communities endeavoured to carry into practice, have been transmuted by the slow alchemy of history into the ethics of Roman law. The basis of Christian society is not Christian but Roman and Stoical." 2 Nevertheless, the book should not be construed as radical in its day, as many Christian communities in the West were already well...

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on the way to acceptance of pagan ethics as their own. De officiis and other of Ambrose's writings serve to define, at least as much as they determine the future of, Latin Christianity.

**Common Ownership**

Despite his celebrated interventions in the realm of church-state relationships, Ambrose is a conservative figure in the history of Western social thought. Hence, it is surprising that he can be associated with the idea of a revolution in the economic order as fundamental as that envisaged by St. John Chrysostom. Homes Dudden, for example, contends that, "Ambrose denies altogether the right to own private property. He holds that private property is contrary alike to the ordinance of God and the law of Nature, and is a deplorable abuse originating in human avarice." This contention can be grounded in a variety of statements by Ambrose. In the De officiis he writes:

"Nature has poured forth all things for the common use of all men. And God has ordained that all things should be produced that there might be food in common for all, and that the earth should be the common possession of all. Nature created common rights, but usurpation has transformed them into private rights."

Ambrose returns to the same theme on other occasions. "God meant this earth," he affirms, "to be the common possession of all men and to produce its fruits for all, but avarice has created the various rights of property." Again, he challenges his readers: "Why do you think that any portion of the world is common to all? And why do you reckon that the fruits of the earth are private, when the earth itself is the property of all in common?"

Passages such as these suggest that for Ambrose, the only truly Christian economic order is one based on the principle of common possession. Yet, in practice, he does not recommend such an order. Louis Swift points out that Ambrose, "not only argues that wealth can be an incentive to virtue (in Luc 5.69; 8.85; epist. 2.11; in psalm 40.31) and that giving up all one's possessions in pursuit of Christian perfection is a mat-

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4 F. Homes Dudden, op.cit., p. 545.
5 Ambrose, De officiis, i, 132.
6 Ambrose, Expos. ps. XCVIII, 8, 22.
7 Ambrose, De Viduis, 5.