

# ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

BY  
REV. JOHN A. <sup>AUGUSTINE</sup> RYAN, D.D.  
Author of "Francisco Ferrer," "Church  
and Interest-taking," etc.

ST. LOUIS, MO., 1913  
PUBLISHED BY B. HERDER  
17 SOUTH BROADWAY

FREIBURG (BADEN)  
GERMANY

LONDON, W. C.  
68, GREAT RUSSELL STR.

335  
R98A

**NIHIL OBSTAT**

**Sti. Ludovici, die 26. Juni 1913**

**F. G. Holweck,  
Censor Librorum.**

6874

**IMPRIMATUR**

**Sti. Ludovici, die 28. Juni 1913**

**✠ Joannes J. Glennon,  
Archiepiscopus  
Sti. Ludovici**

**Copyright, 1913,  
by  
Joseph Gummersbach**

LAB  
519-7553  
LABRE  
10-2688

## FOREWORD

CERTAIN Socialists are fond of asserting that the Fathers of the Church denied the right of private property, and defended common ownership. The only basis for the claim is some passages cited more or less correctly by Bebel,<sup>1</sup> de Laveleye,<sup>2</sup> and Nitti.<sup>3</sup> In all probability these writers got the extracts directly or indirectly from a work entitled, "Traite de la morale des peres," written at the beginning of the eighteenth century by a French Calvinist named Jean Barbeyrac. The little volume herewith presented to the public contains all the important passages used by these writers and by Socialists, and also typical extracts from

<sup>1</sup> "Die Frau," p. 297, note.

<sup>2</sup> "Le Socialisme contemporain," p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> "Catholic Socialism," p. 64.

## FOREWORD

*all* the strongest statements made by *all* the Fathers on the question of private property and wealth. None of the citations has been improperly separated from the context, and the briefest of them is sufficiently comprehensive to reflect adequately the thought of its author on the specific point under discussion.

The references at the end of the extracts are to the volumes and columns of Migne's Patrologia. Thus: "P. L., 15: 1303, 1304," means "Patrologia Latina," volume 13, columns 1303 and 1304. Similarly, "P. G., 61: 86," is the abbreviation for "Patrologia Graeca," volume 61, column 86.

JOHN A. RYAN.

ST. PAUL SEMINARY,  
*March, 1913.*

# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I § I THE GREEK FATHERS . . . . .	1
§II THE LATIN FATHERS . . . . .	12
II ST. BASIL . . . . .	17
III ST. AMBROSE . . . . .	52
IV ST. JEROME. . . . .	67



# ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

## CHAPTER I

### I. The Greek Fathers

#### ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (347-407)

JUST as, therefore, it is a vice of the stomach to retain and not distribute food, and thus cause injury to the whole body; so likewise it is a vice of the rich when they retain among themselves those things which they possess; for this injures them and others. P. G., 61: 86.

\* \* \* \* \*

Neither is any one able to become rich without injustice. Christ declared this, saying: "Make to yourselves friends of the

## 2 ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

mammon of iniquity" (Lk. 16:9). "What," you say, "if one received paternal goods by heredity?" The goods which he received were gathered together through iniquity. For his forefathers did not get their wealth from Adam: they must have been preceded by many other possessors, among whom many a one had seized goods that belonged to his neighbor. P. G., 62: 562.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tell me, whence are you rich? From whom have you received? From your grandfather, you say; from your father. Are you able to show, ascending in the order of generation, that that possession is just throughout the whole series of preceding generations? Its beginning and root grew necessarily out of injustice. Why? Because God did not make this man rich and that man poor from the beginning. Nor, when He created the world, did He allot much treasure to one man, and forbid an-



other to seek any. He gave the same earth to be cultivated by all. Since, therefore, His bounty is common, how comes it that you have so many fields, and your neighbor not even a clod of earth? "My father," you say, "left it to me." From whom did he receive it? From his forefathers. But, if you continue, you must at last get back to the beginning. Jacob was rich, but his wealth was received as the reward of his labor. But I shall not go into this matter too deeply. Riches may be just, and free from all robbery; nor are you at fault if your father was a robber. You possess, indeed, the results of plunder, but you have not plundered. Granted even that your father despoiled no one, but extracted his gold from the earth. What then? Are riches therefore good? By no means. "But they are not evil," you say. If they were not acquired through avarice or violence they are not evil, provided that they are shared with the needy;

#### 4 ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

if they are not thus shared, they are evil and dangerous. "As long as one has not done evil," you say, "he is not evil, even though he does no good." Correct; but is it not wrong to hold in exclusive possession the Lord's goods, and to enjoy alone that which is common? Are not the earth and the fullness thereof the Lord's? If, therefore, our possessions are the common gift of the Lord, they belong also to our fellows; for all the things of the Lord are common. Do we not see such a disposition of things in great houses? An even share of food is supplied from the owner's substance to all; his house is open to all. Common, too, are the goods of the king: cities, streets, colonnades, are common to all; in them we are all equally partakers. Behold the economy of God as it appears to me. He made certain things common to teach the human race modesty. Such are the air, sun, water, earth, heaven, sea, light, stars. He distributed all these

things equally as among brothers. He created the same eyes in all, the same body, the same soul, a similar form in all. All things are from the earth, all men from one man, all live in the same house. He made other things common, as baths, cities, streets, colonnades. Observe how in all these common things, there is no strife, but all is peaceable. But when each one endeavors to usurp a certain portion, in order to make it his own, a quarrel arises, as if nature were moved to indignation when we, whom God has gathered together, endeavor to divide and separate ourselves, to acquire those common goods as our own, and to utter those chilling words, "mine" and "thine." Then comes contention; then quarrels. Where there is none of this, contention and strife do not arise. For this reason, community of goods rather than chance-determined private property was bestowed upon us, and is according to nature. Why does no one ever contend

## 6 ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

for the possession of the forum? Because it is common to all. But we see all quarreling about a house, and about money. Although the common goods are necessary for us, we do not, even in the smallest things, respect their social side. God gave us these common goods that we might learn to possess them in common; we, however, do not conform to His designs. But, as I have already said, how can he who has riches be just? He certainly is not. He is good only if he distributes them to others: if he is without riches he is good; if he distributes to others he is good; but as long as he retains them, he is not good. Can a thing be good, the possession of which makes men unjust, the distribution of which makes them just? It is not good, therefore, to have money; not to have it manifests the just man. Hence riches are not good. If, when you are able to take, you do not take, you are likewise good. If, when having riches, we

distribute to others, or if we do not take them when they are offered to us, we are good; but if we take or retain them, the thing is not good. How can riches be good? Therefore, do not call them good. Because you have them not, you think them good, and regard them with longing. Have a pure mind and right judgment, and then you will be good. Learn the things that are truly good. What are these things? Virtue and beneficence; these are good, not riches. P. G., 62: 562, 563, 564.

#### ST BASIL (329-379)

If that were true which you have affirmed, that you have obeyed the commandment of love from youth, and have given to every one as much as to yourself, whence, I ask, have you all this wealth? For the care of the poor consumes wealth, when each receives a little for his needs, and all owners distribute their means simultaneously for

## 8 ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

the care of the needy. Hence whoever loves his neighbor as himself, will possess no more than his neighbor. Yet it is plain that you have very much wealth. Whence these riches? Undoubtedly you have subordinated the relief and comfort of many to your own convenience. Therefore, the more you abound in riches, the more you have been wanting in charity. If you had loved your neighbor you would have thought of sharing your money with others. P. G., 31: 282.

\* \* \* \* \*

To whom, he says, do I injury when I retain and conserve my own? Which things, tell me, are yours? Whence have you brought your goods into life? You are like one occupying a place in a theater, who should prohibit others from entering, treating that as his own which was designed for the common use of all. Such are the rich. Because they pre-occupy common goods, they take these goods

as their own. If each one would take that which is sufficient for his needs, leaving what is superfluous to those in distress, no one would be rich, no one poor. Did you not come naked from the womb? Will you not return naked into the earth? Whence then have you your present possessions? If you say, "by destiny," you are impious, because you do not acknowledge the Creator, nor give thanks to the giver; if you admit they are from God, tell us why you have received them. Is God unjust, to distribute the necessities of life to us unequally? Why are you rich, why is that man poor? Is it not that you may receive the reward of beneficence and faithful distribution, and that he may receive the great rewards of patience? Do you think that you who have taken everything into the unlimited compass of your avarice, thereby depriving so many others, have done injury to no one? Who is an avaricious man? He who is not content

with those things which are sufficient. Who is a robber? He who takes the goods of another. Are you not avaricious? Are you not a robber? You who make your own the things which you have received to distribute. Will not he be called a thief who robs one, already clothed, of his garment, and is he worthy of any other title who will not clothe the naked if he is able to do so? That bread which you keep, belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession, to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground, to the needy. Wherefore, as often as you were able to help men, and refused, so often did you do them wrong. P. G., 31: 275, 278.

### ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA (d. 386)

For all things are truly His who is our Father. For we are brothers. Wherefore,



since we are united by birth as brothers, it were indeed better and more just to receive the inheritance in equal portions; but when that is not done, and one or another wishes to appropriate more, let the rest receive at least one portion. But if one wishes to be absolute master of all, to obtain the entire inheritance, and to exclude his brothers from even a third or fifth part, he is not a brother, but a harsh tyrant, a rude savage, nay, more, an insatiable beast that would devour the whole sweet banquet with his own gaping mouth. P. G., 46: 466.

### **CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (150-215)**

I know that God has given us the use of goods, but only as far as is necessary; and He has determined that the use be common. It is absurd and disgraceful for one to live magnificently and luxuriously when so many are hungry. P. G., 8: 543.

## II. The Latin Fathers

## ST. AUGUSTINE (354-430)

Behold how only a few things suffice for you; nor does God ask much of you. Seek as much as he has given you, and from that take as much as is necessary; the superfluous things which remain are the necessities of others. The superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor. They who possess superfluities, possess the goods of others. P. L., 37: 1922.

\* \* \* \* \*

Let your charity abound; for from those things that we possess individually come quarrels, enmities, discords, wars among men, tumults, dissensions, scandals, sins, iniquities, murders. On account of what? On account of the things which each of us possesses. Do we quarrel over the things which we have in common? We have the

same air in common, we all see the same sun.  
P. L., 37: 1718.

### ST. AMBROSE (340-397)

They [the Philosophers] counted it a requisite of justice that one should treat common, that is, public, goods as public, but private goods as one's own. This is not, indeed, according to nature; for nature gives all things in common to all. So God commanded all things to be created in such a way that food should be common to all, and the earth the common possession of all. Nature, therefore, created the common right; usurpation made the private right. P. L., 16: 62.

\* \* \* \* \*

How far, O rich, do you extend your senseless avarice? Do you intend to be the sole inhabitants of the earth? Why do you drive out the fellow sharers of nature, and claim it all for yourselves? The earth was

## 14 ALLEGED SOCIALISM OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

made for all, rich and poor, in common. Why do you rich claim it as your exclusive right? P. L., 14: 731.

\* \* \* \* \*

You do not give to the poor man of your own, but of his. That which was given for the common use of all, you have usurped for yourself. The earth belongs to all, not to the rich; but those who enjoy their shares, are fewer than those who do not. Therefore, you are paying a debt, not bestowing a gift. P. L., 14: 747.

Since, therefore, he is your equal, it is unjust that he is not assisted by his fellow man; especially since the Lord our God has willed this earth to be the common possession of all men, and its fruits to support all. Avarice, however, has made a distribution of property rights. It is just, therefore, that if you claim as your own anything of that which was given to the human race, indeed, even to all living beings, in common, you

should distribute at least a part among the poor, in order that you may not deny sustenance to those who ought to be fellow sharers of your private possessions. P. L., 15:1303, 1304.

### **ST. GREGORY THE GREAT (540-604)**

They must be admonished who do not seek another's goods, yet do not give of their own, that they may know that the earth from which they have received is common to all men, and therefore its products are given in common to all. They, therefore, wrongly think they are innocent who claim for themselves the common gift of God. When they do not give what they have received, they assist in the death of neighbors, because daily almost as many of the poor perish as have been deprived of means which the rich have kept to themselves. When we give necessities to the needy we do not bestow upon them our goods; we return to them their

own; we pay a debt of justice rather than fulfil a work of mercy. Hence when the Truth Himself spoke about mercy prudently shown, He said: "Take heed lest you do your justice before men." (Matt. 6:1.) The Psalmist agreeing with this opinion said: "He has distributed. He has given to the poor, and His justice remaineth forever." (Ps. 111:9.) Since He had fore-ordained a great bounty for the poor, He did not wish to call this mercy, but justice; for it is surely just that what is given by our common Lord for every one should be used in common. P. L., 77:87.

### ST. JEROME (340-420)

All riches come from iniquity, and unless one has lost, another cannot gain. Hence that common opinion seems to me to be very true, "the rich man is unjust, or the heir an unjust one." P. L., 22: 984.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER II

### **Saint Basil**

THE present chapter presents a study in detail of the opinions of one of the Greek Fathers, St. Basil. It is followed by an equally thorough examination of two of the Latin Fathers, St. Ambrose and St. Jerome. Since these three are fully representative of all the others, and are the ones most frequently cited by the Socialists, a vindication of them from the charge of antagonism to private ownership will apply to the Fathers generally, and ought to dispose of all the Socialist assertions on the subject. Before taking up the more specific study, it may be helpful to summarize the most important phases of the whole situation, and to indicate the points that will be established.

1. None of the Fathers either explicitly or implicitly denied the right of private property. In the first place, all the doubtful passages can and should be explained in a sense consistent with the belief in private ownership; and, in the second place, there are other passages in the writings of these Fathers which show beyond question that such was their belief.

2. Many of the Fathers asserted more or less explicitly that the rich men of the day had acquired their wealth unjustly. Now, this is a question of fact, and the history of the time furnishes abundant reason for thinking that this Patristic judgment was true of the majority of the class upon which it was pronounced.

3. All the Fathers declared that a man's "superfluous goods" belong to his needy neighbor. Far from being unusual, this is the teaching explicitly set forth by the greatest of the theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas



(*Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae, q.66, a.7), and has been the commonly accepted doctrine in the Church from the beginning to the present. It has always been held, however, that a man was not obliged to give away *all* his superfluous goods or income when the need depending upon his gifts was only "ordinary." The obligation assumed these proportions only when the people to be assisted were in "grave" or "extreme" need, and when such need was so extensive as to require for its relief all the superfluous goods available. Undoubtedly this was the situation in the period and the environment in which the Fathers spoke and wrote. Nevertheless, the doctrine of giving all one's superfluous goods to the needy would require a different formulation to-day in two main points. First, modern industrial conditions demand that the man of wealth should distribute a part of his goods indirectly, that is, by investing them in productive and

labor-employing enterprises. Second, the superfluous goods that ought to be given to the needy belong to them by the moral title of charity, not, as a rule, by the title of justice. This distinction was not insisted upon by the Fathers. Nor was it necessary from the viewpoint of practical righteousness; for the obligation was a grave and urgent one.

4. The language employed by the Fathers in denouncing the rich, and in laying down the duty of distribution incumbent upon the latter, is much stronger than would now be used by churchmen in similar positions. This fact is largely explained by differences in the amount and degree of distress, differences in the conduct of the rich, differences in the temperament and training of the speakers, and general differences in the whole social and cultural environment.

5. These extracts from the Fathers are,

however, by no means out of date. They teach a lesson that is as badly needed to-day as at any other time since Christ first proclaimed the Gospel of Brotherly Love. In our quite proper and necessary insistence upon the inviolability of private property, we sometimes overlook the social side of wealth and ownership. This was the aspect that was emphasized by the Fathers because the circumstances of their time demanded such emphasis. It likewise demands emphasis to-day—not, indeed, in the same terms, but to a considerably greater degree than actually prevails. There is need, in the first place, of proclaiming and incessantly repeating the traditional Christian doctrine that superfluous goods, that is, the amount of a man's income that remains after he has made reasonable provision for himself and his dependents, belong by the law of Christian charity to one's less fortunate fellows, and ought to be distributed

among them, directly or indirectly, in one or more of the hundred and one ways in which money is capable of benefiting mankind. In the second place, and especially, the world is in sore need of a more liberal conception of "superfluous goods," and of a saner and more Christian conception of what constitutes reasonable life, reasonable provision for individual and family maintenance, and lawful indulgence in the goods of the senses. Not only the rich, but all classes except the very poor, are spending too much money for the material things of life, and far too little for the spiritual, the altruistic, and the intellectual things. False standards of living, of enjoyment, and of achievement pervade all classes from the top to the bottom. This is the fundamental, all-determining evil of our time with regard to the getting and using of wealth. Until it is fairly and honestly faced, we can make no headway toward a permanent solution

of those problems which we sum up under the phrase, "the social question."

Although St. Basil renounced his property in early youth, he never gave it all up unconditionally. He leased a certain portion of it to a foster brother on condition that he should be supported out of the profits accruing therefrom. And, notwithstanding his episcopal duties, he retained some interest in the management of this estate, as we learn from two letters written to a certain tax official. In one of these letters he asks that the estate be left at its old assessment, and in the other he explains the conditions on which his foster brother took charge of the property. "At the same time, this was not regarded as an absolute gift; he was to have only the use during life, so that, if anything serious happen to him on account of this arrangement, he is at liberty to give the property back to me, and I shall

thus in another way be responsible for rates and collectors." St. Basil, therefore, acted as landlord, received an "unearned increment," and stood ready to reassume active direction of the states he had leased. This conduct is inconsistent with the supposition that he believed private property to be wrong.

"Do not give your soul up to riches, loving and admiring them as the one good thing in life, but take advantage of them, using them as an instrument of service."<sup>1</sup>

The rich man is here exhorted to make a proper use of his wealth, but he is not told that wealth is in itself unlawful. On the contrary, he is assured that it may be made to serve good ends.

In another place he says that money is called the "mammon of iniquity" because, "some of the predecessors of the present holders may have obtained it unlawfully."

<sup>1</sup> P. G., 29:482.

This distinction supposes that some property may be lawfully acquired, consequently that private property in itself is right. Otherwise he would not need to go back to the original proprietors to find a reason for calling this particular property "iniquitous."

Again, he often advises men to *sell* their property and give the proceeds to the poor. This he could not have done had he believed private ownership to be wrong. He could not have directed men to sell what they did not own, to attempt to convey to others a title that they did not themselves possess. This would be getting money under false pretences; for where there are no private rights there can be no buying and selling. If St. Basil were a communist he should have told individual owners to restore their holdings to the state or to distribute them directly among the poor.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> P. G., 31:298.

## ST. BASIL'S POINT OF VIEW.

Enough has been said to show that St. Basil, in some instances at least, sanctioned the institution of private ownership. Why, then, is he cited as a communist? One reason seems to be that those who make this charge have not studied his writings with sufficient thoroughness. They invariably appeal to a single passage, which, as we shall see presently, *can* be made to express a belief in some vague sort of communism. Besides this, it must be acknowledged that St. Basil's language concerning the rich is always severe. He seems to regard great wealth as a curse, and the owners thereof as utterly heartless and unscrupulous. A fair sample of his denunciation of these men is found in the following words addressed to usurers: "You are making a profit out of misfortune; you are levying a tax upon tears. You are strangling the naked. You



are dealing blows to the starving." A bishop in our time would probably not speak in this manner; but if we would understand St. Basil aright we must examine his language in the light of his character and surroundings. By temperament and training he was an ascetic, and his severest strictures on property were written, not in scientific treatises, but in fervid sermons to an arrogant class of rich men.

#### HIS EARLY EDUCATION.

His early education was received in the schools of Athens, where he was known no less for piety than for diligence and ability. In an immoral and skeptical environment he remained pure in heart and unshaken in faith. His friend and fellow-student, Julian, left Athens with the seeds of apostasy already taken root in his soul; St. Basil quitted the same school and city with a firm resolve to renounce the world and follow

Christ. He then visited Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and other parts of the East to study the manner of life of those little groups that had already withdrawn from the world. After his return to Cappadocia he united with some kindred spirits to establish a retreat at Pontus, thus becoming the founder of monasticism in Asia Minor. Throughout his after life he continued a consistent ascetic, living on the poorest fare, wearing hair cloth, and "treating his body as an angry owner treats a runaway slave." Is it any wonder that a man of this character should regard right living and charitable doing as of more importance than a jealous guardianship of property rights? For him rights were of less consequence than obligations, and the obligations that he strove to enforce were of the highest kind. Some men recognize no duties of ownership except those demanded by the civil law. They think themselves free to do what they please

with their possessions so long as they violate no legal enactment. Others acknowledge that there is a wider sphere of duties, that of natural ethics. Still others are conscious of a third group of duties, namely those of Christian charity; while those who take the highest view of ownership go further and use their wealth as a means of practicing asceticism. This was the view of St. Basil. He tried to make men not only law-abiding, just, and charitable, but even self-denying, in the use of their possessions. The following is an instance in point: "If you had kept the commandment of love from your youth, as you say, and had given to each man as much as to yourself, whence came these riches? . . . He who loves his neighbor as himself will have no more than his neighbor; but you have great riches; hence the greater your wealth, the less your charity."<sup>1</sup> To be sure, St. Basil

<sup>1</sup> P. G., 31:282.

never attempted to enforce this view as binding on all, but he strove to extend it as widely as he could, and consequently came to regard the proper and generous distribution of one's goods as the most important aspect of private ownership. To the rich, therefore, he spoke always of duties, never of rights, and, as I have already intimated, his condemnations of wealth are invariably found in sermons addressed to men of this class. His aim was to arouse these men to a sense of duty rather than to write an exact treatise on the ethics of property.

We now come to consider the strongest arraignment of wealth that is to be found in all of St. Basil's writings. It is from this passage that Socialistic writers have quoted the saying that they have made so much of, "the rich man is a thief." We shall see presently whether this is a fair rendering of St. Basil's thought. In the meantime it will be well to bear in mind

what we have already seen, namely, that St. Basil exercised the right of private property himself, that several of his expressions clearly imply that it is correct in principle, and that his asceticism, together with the end for which he wrote, led him to insist upon the social rather than the individual side of ownership. Hence the presumption arises that the language of a doubtful passage should not receive a communistic interpretation. The extract that follows is sufficiently long to give a complete thought, and notwithstanding its severe tone, it is representative of St. Basil's general view.

GOD THE ABSOLUTE PROPRIETOR.

"What you call your own is not yours in the way you suppose; you did not bring it into the world. You rich are like a man that would keep all others out of a theater, using what was intended for all as his exclusively, simply because he was the first to arrive."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> P. G., 31:275.

The rich man is here represented as arrogantly asking how he does wrong by retaining and guarding what belongs to him. St. Basil replies by asking him whence he has derived such unlimited authority over his wealth. He does not forbid the rich man to lay claim to some private property, but reminds him that this right does not include absolute and unconditional control. The rich man did not create his possessions; he received them from God; hence his title is a dependent one to be used in accordance with the will of the Absolute Owner. As St. Thomas says, commenting on these words, "the rich man is blamed for thinking that his holdings were his *primarily*, forgetting that they had to come from God." Consequently the subordinate owner cannot do what he wishes with his property, but only what God wishes. And God wishes that the individual should exercise the right of ownership in such a way as not to en-

croach upon the common rights of his fellow men. Hence he may not appropriate to himself so much property that others are entirely excluded. Now this is precisely what the rich man had done, as we see from the illustration drawn from the theater. St. Basil explains that the right to take to oneself the goods of the earth is limited by the rights of others, precisely as the right of one spectator to seats at the show is limited by the like rights of his fellow spectators. That is, just as the theater was intended for the accommodation of all, so the earth was designed by God to furnish sustenance for all. This right of each man to a living is inalienable—not to be violated by the claims of any first occupant. In case of a conflict private rights must yield to common rights. Hence it is not *individual ownership*, but *individual greed* and *usurpation* that St. Basil condemns. St. Thomas's explanation of this theater comparison is that

the rich man does not do wrong if while pre-occupying a thing that was common from the beginning, he distributes some of it to others, but he sins by excluding others entirely.<sup>1</sup> It is curious to note that Henry George uses this same illustration of a first-comer monopolizing all the seats in a theater, to show how far the principle of private property may be carried.<sup>2</sup> His conclusion is that private property in land is wrong. St. Basil's conclusion is that the principle of private ownership is capable of no such unlimited extension. Instead of saying that it is unjust in itself, he says that it must be restricted.

#### MAN AND HIS PROPERTY.

His teaching in a word is that man, being solely a dependent proprietor, may not do what he pleases with his property. Only men who misunderstand the nature and lim-

<sup>1</sup> 2a, 2ae, q. 66, a. I. ad sec.

<sup>2</sup> Progress and Poverty, book VII, c. I.



itations of private ownership could call this doctrine communistic. In truth, it is the Christian doctrine, for as St. Thomas says, "a man has not the right to use it as he pleases."<sup>1</sup> It is also the doctrine of natural law and reason. A right never includes the permission to abuse. "A man may not do what he likes with his own, but only what he ought."<sup>2</sup> And he ought to do nothing that would hinder his neighbor from obtaining a decent living. The right to hold individual property is necessary—sacred—but it is not an end in itself. It is only a means to the better development of each man's personality, and the better fulfillment of each man's obligations. Since these ends can be obtained without attaching to private ownership an unlimited character, the assumed right of St. Basil's rich man—or any other man, rich or poor—to do what he

<sup>1</sup> 2a, 2ae, q. 66, a. II, in corp.

<sup>2</sup> W. S. Lilly, "On Right and Wrong," p. 197.

pleases with his own is unnecessary and unfounded. Yet this assumption, in practice, at least, has been quite generally made. Upon it some plausible and popular arguments against the institution of private property have been based. Proudhon, assuming that the right of property included the right to abuse as well as to use, declared that "property is robbery."<sup>1</sup> Henry George maintained that private ownership in land carried to its ultimate conclusion would mean "that any one human being, could he concentrate in himself the individual rights to the land of any country, could expel therefrom all the rest of the inhabitants, and could he thus concentrate the individual rights of the whole surface of the globe, he alone of all the teeming population of the globe would have the

<sup>1</sup> "De la Propriété," c. II.; Cf. Brants, "Les Théories Economiques Aux XIIIe et XIVe Siècles," p. 61; and Ortolan, "Tableau Historiques des Instituts," t. I, p. 253.

right to live.”<sup>1</sup> Herbert Spencer in the earlier editions of “Social Statics,” condemned private property on the ground that it would involve a land-owning despotism, “in which the sole proprietor of any kingdom might impose just what regulations he might choose on its inhabitants.”<sup>2</sup> If private property could be carried to such extreme lengths it were indeed much better abolished, but with St. Basil we deny that it can be so extended, and maintain that the exaggerated individualism of the age and a false ethics of ownership are responsible for the misunderstanding and criticisms of Patristic teaching on this subject.

“If every man would only take what is sufficient for his needs, leaving the rest to those in want there would be no rich and no poor. You came into the world naked; you will leave it naked; whence then came your present wealth? If you say from fate, you are impious because you do not acknowledge the Creator nor return thanks to the Giver; but if you

<sup>1</sup> *Progress and Poverty*, loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup> *Social Statics*, c. IX, 1850.

confess that it is from God, tell us on what conditions you have received it."<sup>1</sup>

#### ALL WEALTH FROM GOD.

Evidently St. Basil has in mind an ideal condition of things when he refers to a distribution of wealth that would abolish both riches and poverty. His asceticism finds expression here. While he would doubtless be pleased to have the rich men to whom he is speaking accept his view of the folly of great possessions, he does not call them criminals for not doing so. He simply continues his argument by challenging them to show cause why they should not share some of their wealth with their poorer neighbors. He repeats the opening thought of the extract that we have just considered, namely, that they have not created their wealth nor brought it into the world with them, consequently that they are not its absolute and irresponsible masters, and cannot do what they

<sup>1</sup> P. G. 31: 275.

please with it. Neither have they received it from fate, but from God; and God has given it to them on condition that they should use it in accordance with His will. Thus St. Basil's main thought is that human proprietors are only *subordinate administrators* of the goods that have been committed to them.

"Do you think God is so unjust as to will an unequal distribution of the necessities of life? Why are you rich and your neighbor poor? Is it not that you may receive the reward of generosity and faithful distribution, and he, that of patience? Yet you fancy that you do no one an injury by gathering all things into the fathomless recesses of your greed."<sup>1</sup>

The first sentence of this extract seems to suppose the rich man asserting that, since his wealth has been given him by God, his control of it was exclusive and his title unconditioned by any obligations to his neighbors. St. Basil replies by insisting on the natural rights of these men to the necessities

<sup>1</sup> P. G., 31:275.

of life, and intimating that if God intended the existing unequal distribution of these goods to be permanent He would be unjust. The language here, and also the illustration concerning the theater, might seem at first sight to imply that all men ought to have equal shares of goods, but this interpretation is not correct. St. Basil protests against the unequal distribution, not of wealth in general—*divitiae*—but of the *necessities of life*; “*necessaria vitae*” are the words used. He protests against the arrangement that would leave some men without the means of living. Such a distribution would, of course, be unjust, no matter who made it, for the right to sustenance is superior to all private rights. Therefore, St. Basil intimates, the present order of things, in which one man has more than he needs and many men cannot get sufficient to sustain life, is not sanctioned by God. He allows one to be rich and another to be poor, not that the

rich man may keep to himself all that he has, while the poor man is in want; but that the former may be enabled to merit a reward for generosity and faithful distribution, and that the latter may deserve a return for his patience. Hence, instead of demanding that all men should have equal amounts of wealth, St. Basil declares that God has a purpose in allowing one man to have more and another less. And he insists that the rich man must use his wealth in conformity with this purpose, that is, he must distribute some of it to those in want. Proprietors are but stewards, trustees, administrators of their wealth, and not its absolute lords. They are amenable to God for the proper fulfillment of their trust, and this trust includes the duty of using their wealth in such a way that their neighbors shall not want for the necessities of life. "As to the *use* of things, they belong also to those that can be sustained out of their

abundance.”<sup>1</sup> St. Basil’s is substantially the Christian idea of ownership, although a bishop who should write on this subject to-day would probably carefully point out how far this duty of distribution came under the head of justice and how far under that of charity.

#### THE HEARTLESS RICH.

“You are an avaricious man because you are not satisfied with enough. You are a despoiler because you have taken what belongs to another, making your own that which you have received to distribute.”<sup>2</sup>

A clear distinction is here made between greed and usurpation, between avarice and injustice, and the rich man is declared guilty of both offenses. But the primary sin—the sin that makes the rich man a despoiler—is his failure to distribute the goods that have been committed to him. To-day we should not call a man a despoiler merely for re-

<sup>1</sup> 2a 2ae, q. 32, a. V, ad 2um.

<sup>2</sup> P. G., 31:275.



fusing to give alms. If the poor had been defrauded by him he would be acting unjustly in not making restitution; if their poverty was due to other causes he would sin against charity by refusing to aid them. This is the commonly accepted ethics of almsgiving. St. Basil, however, seems to ignore this distinction. As a matter of fact, the rich men to whom he is speaking seem to have plundered their fellows; for in the second last extract quoted he accuses them of having usurped "all things." In that case they would certainly be despoilers, but the general principle that he seems to lay down is that men are dishonest whenever they fail to make a proper distribution of their possessions. Thus he continues to insist on the doctrine that wealth is a trust to be administered for the benefit, not of the owner alone, but of all who are in need. His idea of ownership, in brief, seems to be as follows: first, all men have from nature a right

to a certain portion—say, a decent minimum—of the world's goods; secondly, this common right is so far superior to any private right that the individual proprietor, no matter by what title he holds his wealth, is bound in justice to distribute some of it to those who are not in the enjoyment of their common, natural right.

“When you do not clothe the naked you are as much a thief as if you took the clothing from their backs. Yes, the bread that you retain, the cloak in your box, the shoes that are moldering in your possession, the silver that you have buried,—all belong to the needy. Hence you have inflicted injury on as many as you have failed to succour.”<sup>1</sup>

In all probability it is from this passage that de Laveleye and the others quote, when they accuse St. Basil of calling the rich man a thief. This accusation as they make it is plainly unfair, since the rich man is called a thief not merely for being rich, but for not making a proper use of his riches.

<sup>1</sup> P. G., 31:278.

## HE WHO REFUSES TO GIVE.

St. Basil is undoubtedly speaking figuratively when he says that the man who refuses to give is as guilty as the man who forcibly takes away; there is at least the difference between negative and positive guilt in the two cases. But is the mere refusal to distribute one's superfluous goods to persons in extreme need a sin of spoliation? of theft? St. Basil affirms that it is. This seems a startling assertion, but in view of the facts and principles, it is substantially correct. As to the facts, the men for whom St. Basil pleads were in extreme need, being without bread, clothing, shoes or money; the men whom he denounces had an abundance of all these things. As to doctrine, it is the teaching of St. Thomas that "a man may supply his urgent necessities from the goods of another, either openly or secretly, and this will not be, properly speak-

ing, theft, because what is taken *belongs* to the needy one, since he must sustain life.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the doctrine, according to both the natural and the Christian law, of the supreme right of every human being to live upon the bounty of the earth. Corresponding to this natural right of the needy is an obligation resting on the rich. St. Thomas thus describes it: “When there is no other way of relieving such distress, he who has more goods than he needs sins grievously if he does not distribute them.”<sup>2</sup> He “sins grievously,” but how? Against charity only, or against justice also? If the refusal to distribute is an offense against charity merely, then St. Basil was not strictly correct in calling the greedy rich of his time thieves. The theologians disagree on this point, some affirming that this neglect of the needy is a sin against both

<sup>1</sup> 2a, 2ae, q. 66, a. VII, in corp et ad 2um.

<sup>2</sup> 2a, 2ae, q. 32, a. V. ad 3ium.

charity and justice, while others deny that it is anything more than a transgression of charity. Pope Leo XIII seems to intimate that in extreme cases this duty of giving alms out of superfluous goods, is one of justice.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, St. Basil was literally correct in calling the selfish rich men of his time "thieves" and "despoilers." At any rate, all theologians are agreed that a rich man is at least obliged in justice *not to interfere* with a starving neighbor who attempts to seize enough to keep himself alive. Now we may safely conclude that a man who would refuse to give away any of his wealth to those in want would also resist all attempts of these men to help themselves out of what he considered his own. Viewed in the concrete, then, St. Basil's language is not so startling.

<sup>1</sup> "On the Condition of Labor;" paragraph on the right use of money.

## THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF OWNERSHIP.

From the examination that has been made we may, I think, safely draw two conclusions; first, that St. Basil does not deny the right of private property, but, on the contrary, that his conduct and language assume it; secondly, that he did not attach to private ownership the absolute, irresponsible character, that many have given it in recent times. He acknowledged the right of private property within its legitimate sphere, but he did not place it above the right to live. His language concerning riches is severe, much severer than that commonly used by Christian teachers to-day, but this is largely explained by his character, his view of life, and the circumstances with which he had to deal. He does not distinguish closely between the duties of justice and charity, but from his point of view this distinction was not of great importance. He emphasized

the social rather than the individual side of wealth, believing that it was more necessary to vindicate the common rights of all, especially of the poor, to some property than to fix the exact limits of the rights of the rich. For him the one important consideration regarding wealth was its right use, its proper distribution among those who needed it most. Sometimes, indeed, he seems to push this obligation of distribution so far that it encroaches upon the prerogatives of individual ownership, as when he calls the man who does not distribute his wealth a "despoiler." From an academic point of view, he may have insisted too much on the duties and too little on the rights of property. However, he was not writing an academic, but a practical treatise, and from a practical point of view we cannot say that he went too far. The teaching that proprietors are but distributors and dispensers of the goods committed to them by God, has

always been a Christian doctrine. Though it has become quite generally forgotten, it is as true and necessary to-day as it was in the time of St. Basil. "When necessity has been supplied and one's position fairly considered, it is a duty to give to the indigent out of that which is over."<sup>1</sup> But aside from the relief of pressing need, there are various ways of distributing one's superfluous goods. No man, unless he be a Robinson Crusoe on a desert island, amasses wealth without entering into relations with his fellows. An extensive employer of labor will acquire superfluous riches which will be due primarily to God and secondarily to the skill and industry of himself and his workmen. Such a man distributes his superfluous wealth by giving out a fair portion of it in wages. If he pays less than a fair wage he is not making a proper distribution. Or, if he should take possession of so

<sup>1</sup> Encyclical "On the Condition of Labor," loc. cit.



much of the world's natural resources that many of his fellow men would find great difficulty in obtaining a livelihood, he would also be acting the unjust steward. Then, there are his obligations to society for the protection afforded him in his efforts to acquire wealth. Many other phases of the social side of ownership might readily be cited; for in the domain of property rights as elsewhere, "no man liveth unto himself." Private ownership in society—and only in society does it come into *actual* existence—is never an absolute, unconditioned power. This is the central thesis of all St. Basil's denunciations of riches and the rich.

## CHAPTER III

### St. Ambrose.

LIKE St. Basil, Ambrose renounced his property at the beginning of his ecclesiastical career, and, like St. Basil, he renounced it with some restrictions. His gold and silver he gave to the Church, but his estates, with the exception of a life interest for his sister, he committed to the management of his brother Satyrus. Doubtless he thought it proper that a bishop should not be burdened with the care of worldly goods, and that his superfluous wealth as well as his time and energies should be given to the Church. At the same time he saw fit to secure the property rights of his brother and sister, and to retain the legal title to the greater part of his landed possessions. He

must, therefore, have regarded the institution of private property as altogether just. Every act of his life contradicts the supposition that he would have taken personal or family advantage of a thing that he believed to be wrong.

“Wealth is not prejudicial to faith if we but know how to use it.”<sup>1</sup>

“As riches in the wicked are a hindrance, so in the good they are an aid to virtue.”<sup>2</sup>

“Not those that have riches, but those who do not know how to use them, are condemned.”<sup>3</sup>

“Riches are not in themselves blamable. . . . And, even in material riches, there is a place for virtue.”<sup>4</sup>

In these extracts, St. Ambrose condemns the abuse, but not the possession of riches, and declares that when properly used they are a positive aid to virtue. Speaking else-

<sup>1</sup> P. L., 14:1082.

<sup>3</sup> P. L., 15:1654.

<sup>2</sup> P. L., 15:1791.

<sup>4</sup> P. L., 16:1214.

where <sup>1</sup> of the rich young man in the Gospel whom Christ told to sell all his goods and give the price to the poor, he explains that this direction was not a precept, but a counsel, which the young man was free to accept or reject. Consequently he holds that the young man was violating no law in retaining his property.

#### THE EARTH BELONGS TO ALL.

“Instead of giving to the poor man out of what is yours, you are but restoring something of that which belongs to him. For you have appropriated to yourself alone the things that were given as a common possession for the use of all. The earth belongs to all, not merely to the rich; yet those that enjoy their heritage are fewer than those that do not enjoy it. Consequently you do but pay a debt, instead of bestowing an alms.”

“The Lord our God wished the earth to be the common possession of all men and its fruits to sustain all, but avarice has made a distribution of the titles (jura) of possession. Therefore, if you claim as private property anything of that which was given to the whole human race—nay, to all living things—in com-

<sup>1</sup> P. L., 16:256.

mon, it is but just that you should give at least something therefrom to the poor, and thus not deny sustenance to those with whom you ought to be a fellow sharer.”<sup>1</sup>

In his chapter on the political economy of St. Ambrose, the author of a recent work<sup>2</sup> says that, “dominating all of St. Ambrose’s denunciations of riches is the ideal of a truly fraternal society, where wealth would play no rôle, where all things would be at the disposition of all men, where there would be no poor, and, above all, no rich. It was the ideal that was realized by the first Christians.” M. Thamin goes on to say that this ideal could not be realized in the age in which St. Ambrose lived, and that he and the other Fathers adapted themselves to the conditions about them, and sought to renovate these conditions by the Christian spirit of love and fraternity. So far, this author’s

<sup>1</sup> P. L., 14:747; and 15:1303, 1304.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Ambroise et la morale chrétienne au IV siècle*, par Raymond Thamin, p. 288.

interpretation is correct, but when he intimates that St. Ambrose regarded the institution of private property as wrong *in se*, and merely tolerated it as an evil that could not be corrected, he is asserting more than he can prove.<sup>1</sup>

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP AND CHRISTIAN  
COMMUNISM.

He undoubtedly looked upon private ownership as a less excellent order than Christian communism, but it does not thence follow that he thought it immoral. Common property was his ideal, to be sure, but he was not so unreasonable as to make an unattainable ideal the standard of right. There is nothing in all his writings to prove that he believed individual ownership to be against the natural law. In fact, he does not discuss the question under this abstract aspect at all. As a practical man he knew

<sup>1</sup> *Idem*, p. 281.

that private property was necessary for human society, and he strove to make men exercise this right according to the principles of Christianity. When he wrote the two passages quoted above, he most probably had before his mind the ideal distribution of property that obtained among the first Christians. He would wish all men to be fellow-sharers in the gifts of God, but human greed has allotted separate portions to individuals. This language may have a communistic sound, but any fair-minded believer in private property might say the same thing. We should all like to see the ideal of common property realized, but we recognize that greed, selfishness, and the general make-up of human nature render such an arrangement impossible.

What St. Ambrose teaches is not communism in any correct sense of the word. It is rather a first principle of the natural law, namely, that the earth belongs to all the

children of men, and not to a few only. He tells the rich to restore their excessive wealth to the poor, while a communist would order them to turn it over to the community. It is true that he calls these donations of the rich by the name of *restitution*, but this is because the rich have accumulated so much that the poor have been deprived of their birth-right. Hence, he commands them to give back their unjust gains. Any one who will read the history of the oppression of the poor in Italy in the fourth century, will know that St. Ambrose was right when he told the rich that they had robbed the poor, and were consequently bound to make reparation. The most zealous defender of individual ownership could speak the same way in the same circumstances. What St. Ambrose demands therefore is not a return to common property, but a recognition of common rights.



NATURE HAS MADE NO DISTRIBUTION OF  
PROPERTY.

“Then they regarded it as the office of justice that one should hold what is common, that is, what is public, as public property, and what is private as one’s own. The latter institution, indeed, is not according to nature; for nature has poured forth all things as a common gift for all. Thus God decreed all things to be produced in such a way that there would be a common substance for all, and that the earth might be a kind of common possession of all. Nature, therefore, is the mother of common right, *appropriation* of private right.”<sup>1</sup>

As in the two extracts already examined, here also the language sounds communistic. But a fair examination will show that St. Ambrose merely declared that the *actual distribution* of property has been made by man not by nature. All that any man has immediately received from nature is the right to subsist on her bounty, and this right is common to all men. Nature has made no

<sup>1</sup> P. L., 16:62.

distribution, nor given any man a title deed to a particular portion of the earth. She leaves the determination and adjustment of individual rights to society. No individual can claim *exclusive proprietorship* of anything until he comes into relations with his fellows. Even then he cannot make his contention good if it interferes with the just claims of his neighbors. Of course, the right of private property exists, *radically, potentially*, in the nature of man, but it becomes fixed, actual, and living by social action. Society takes the common right and transforms it into individual rights. "Common property is natural, not in the sense that the natural law directs all things to be possessed in common and nothing privately, but in the sense that human convention rather than the natural law brings about a division of property."<sup>1</sup> Right reason and authority, therefore, lead

<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas, 2a, 2ae, q. 66, a. II, ad. prim.

us to the conclusion that St. Ambrose was right when he wrote: "*Naturo igitur jus commune generavit; usurpatio jus fecit privatum.*"

Yet it is this last sentence that has been made so much of by those who quote St. Ambrose as a communist. Their misconception is founded on the word "*usurpatio*," which they invariably translate "*usurpation*." Herr Bebel, in the footnote on page 297 of "*Die Frau*," renders it by the phrase "*ungerechte Anmassung*," but encloses "*usurpatio*" in parenthesis to show that he is not certain of the correctness of his translation. "*Usurpatio*" may indeed have the meaning of "*usurpation*," but in classical Latin it often signified simply "use," "acquiring," "appropriation." That this is the meaning which St. Ambrose intended it to have in this sentence, seems to be extremely probable, for two reasons. First, the word "appropriation" expresses the thought of

Cicero, which St. Ambrose is discussing in this passage, and with which he seems to agree; and, second, to render "*usurpatio*" by "*usurpation*" would be to make St. Ambrose contradict his own conduct and his own statements regarding the lawfulness of private property. As I cannot believe that he would be guilty of this inconsistency, I have interpreted this one obscure text by the numerous clearer expressions found elsewhere in his writings.

#### SIMILARITY OF BASIL'S AND AMBROSE'S VIEWS.

From what we have just seen, it is apparent that the charges of communism against St. Ambrose, like those against St. Basil, have been based on the questionable use of a single sentence. The views of both men on private property are practically the same. Both retained personal ownership of part of their estates, and both explicitly de-

clared that the possession of riches is not in itself unlawful. Both insisted upon the duty of distribution of superfluous goods to the needy, asserting that what is thus distributed really *belongs* to those to whom it is given. They seem to regard this work of distribution as a restitution, but they do not specify whether the rich men whom they have in mind have plundered the poor, or simply have succeeded in heaping up great possessions. Both seem to confuse the duties of justice and charity, but, as I have already remarked concerning St. Basil, this could not have resulted in any violation of the rights of the men with whom they were dealing. And notwithstanding their practical purpose and their somewhat unprecise statement of doctrine, St. Basil and St. Ambrose wrote with as much scientific exactness on the subject of property as any of the Fathers did on any other subject. That is, their writings con-

tain the *substance* of the doctrine that was afterwards more fully and precisely elucidated by the scholastics. Socialist writers who quote the economic views of the Fathers as something radically different from the teaching of modern Catholic theologians, have read both but very superficially. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the Fathers laid more stress on the social side of property than the recent Catholic teachers have done. M. Thamin<sup>1</sup> says that St. Ambrose insisted more on the duties than on the rights of ownership, and that he regarded owners simply as trustees who should be held responsible for the faithful performance of their trust. The same is true of St. Basil. Both dealt with the property holder as with a man bound by obligations to his fellow men. They did not look upon him as an independent entity whose chief concern was to vindicate his individual right

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 286.

to a certain portion of the earth. Neither of them regarded exact definitions of property rights as of supreme importance. In fact, it is only in comparatively recent times—under the reign of individualism and *laissez-faire*—that Christians have come to value so highly the goods of the earth, and to distinguish so carefully between “mine” and “thine.” St. Basil and St. Ambrose were not far removed from the first Christians when “the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul; neither did any one say that aught of the things which he possessed were his own; but all things were common unto them.” The Fathers strove to keep alive this spirit of Christian brotherhood in the use of property. In this respect they are, as M. Thamin<sup>1</sup> says of St. Ambrose, only the representatives of an uninterrupted Christian tradition—the tradition that proprietors are only the interme-

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 290.

diaries, the ministers, the dispensers of the goods committed to them. M. Thamin cites a list of Fathers, theologians, and preachers to prove his statement, but singularly enough omits the name of St. Thomas who wrote: "Concerning *the point of acquiring and disposing* of goods, it is lawful for a man to hold them as his own; but as to the *use* of them, he should regard them as common, so that he may readily distribute them to relieve the necessities of others."<sup>1</sup> Leo XIII declares that this is the teaching of the Church as to the right use of one's possessions. It is certainly the teaching of St. Basil and St. Ambrose.

<sup>1</sup> 2a, 2ae, q. 66, a. II, in corp.



## CHAPTER IV.

### St. Jerome

“Opulence is always the result of theft committed, if not by the actual possessor, then by his predecessors.”

THIS quotation is most likely a free rendering of a maxim that seems to have been current in St. Jerome's time, “*omnis dives aut iniquis aut iniqui haeres.*” It occurs in the three following passages:

In the Commentary on Jeremiah he thus explains the Prophet's condemnation of the wicked men who have become great and rich through deceit: And they fill their houses through the plunder and losses of others, that this saying of the philosophers may be fulfilled, “every rich man is unjust or the heir of an unjust one.” Thus he

makes Jeremiah's words confirm the opinion of the philosophers.

In the Commentary on Habacuc the word "*iniquitate*" is interpreted in a very unexpected manner. "Those who work for honors or riches in this world become the tabernacles of demons; this is significantly shown by the one word iniquity, for 'every rich man is either unjust or the heir of an unjust one.' "

The third place that the proverb occurs is in the Epistle to Hedibia, a widow in Gaul who had written to Jerome to know how she might follow the way of perfection, and how certain passages in the Scriptures were to be interpreted. In answer to her first question he refers to the parable of the Unjust Steward, and draws this inference therefrom: "And you therefore, since you have few children, make to yourself many friends of the mammon of iniquity who may receive you into everlasting dwell-

ings. He said well 'of iniquity'; for all riches come from iniquity, and unless one was the loser another could not be the gainer. Hence that common saying seems to me to be most true: 'The rich man is unjust or the heir of an unjust one.' " Continuing on the same topic, he says that for a rich man to get into heaven is not so much a difficulty as an impossibility. The whole context is most severe upon riches and the rich.<sup>1</sup>

This remarkable saying is stated in substantially the same words in each of the passages quoted above. Once it was given as "the opinion of philosophers," once, without any explanation of its origin, and once, as a "common expression." The important consideration is that Jerome makes it his own, and quotes it with distinct approval. Does this mean that he looked upon every property holder as a thief. Before an-

<sup>1</sup> P. L., 22:984.

swering this question we must determine the meaning of the words "*iniquus*" and *dives*." "*Iniquus*"—from *in*+*aequus*—refers literally to a want of equality or want of proportion. Taken figuratively, it has about the same meaning as "*injustus*," for which it was often used as a synonym by the best authors. Now St. Jerome's style, as well as his own confession, assures us that he was well acquainted with classical Latin. We may safely infer then that he uses this word in the specific sense of "*injustus*," and not in the more general sense of "*peccator*." This inference is confirmed by his manner of speaking in a sentence where he distinguishes between an "*impius*" on the one hand, and an "*iniquus*" and a "*peccator*" on the other. Even if he meant merely "wrong doer" when he wrote "*iniquus*," the specific wrong doing referred to must have been an act of injustice, since it was committed in *acquiring* riches. When

a man gets possessions by wrong doing, the greater part of the wrong will fall under the head of injustice, violation of personal rights. St. Jerome, therefore, subscribed to the opinion that every "dives" was an unjust man, and by "dives" he meant, not a man of some property, but a man of *much* property. All the synonyms of "dives" and its use by the best authors show that it refers to an abundance of goods, and not to mere ownership, as some would have us believe. Hence this famous maxim is correctly translated, "every rich man is unjust or the heir of an unjust one."

#### RICHES STRONGLY DENOUNCED.

Elsewhere St. Jerome denounces riches in equally strong, if not equally terse language. In the Commentary on Micheas we find the following: "Now, however, the rich abound not so much in riches as in injustice, since all riches, being a spoliation of others, are

born of injustice." Reference to the Latin text will show that here at least St. Jerome meant "injustitia" when he wrote "*iniquitas*."<sup>1</sup> In the Commentary on Isaiah we are told that, "one man does not accumulate money except through the loss and injury suffered by another." Again, we are exhorted to beware "lest in taking gifts of the earth from men who have gathered them through plunder and the tears of the wretched, we become not so much thieves ourselves as the companions of thieves."

The passages that I have quoted and their contents show that St. Jerome regarded the riches of his time as dishonestly acquired. This is a question of fact. Did St. Jerome interpret the facts of his time aright? Speaking generally, it is most probable that he did. When he wrote, Rome was in the last stages of economic and moral decay. The yeomanry of the Empire, the men who

<sup>1</sup> P. L., 25:1272.

cultivated the land that was their own, had long before disappeared through violence or impoverishment. Their places had been taken by the holders of the "*Latifundia*," and hordes of dependent tillers. As early as Pliny's time these immense holdings, he tells us, were ruining Italy, while six men held half the province of Africa. The evils of this institution must have increased with time, so that when St. Jerome wrote, they were a standing outrage upon the Christian sense of justice. If we reflect that in those days great wealth was almost invariably acquired by force, we shall incline to the belief that St. Jerome was not far from the truth when he said, "*omnis dives aut iniquus aut iniqui haeres.*" As a matter of fact, he was saying nothing new: He did but repeat what the opinion of philosophers and the common belief of his time had made a "*vulgata sententia.*"

St. Jerome's language is by no means

unique. Herbert Spencer spoke in much the same way of the present titles to landed property. "It can never be pretended that the existing titles to such property are legitimate. . . . Violence, fraud, the prerogative of force, the claims of superior cunning, these are the sources to which these titles may be traced." It is true that Mr. Spencer omitted this passage from the later editions of "Social Statics," but the question is one of fact, not of opinion. W. S. Lilly in his usual vigorous fashion writes: "I say, without shadow of doubt, that to much property the saying of Proudhon is strictly applicable." He also quotes from Charles Devas: "As a matter of fact, much of the wealth of the rich classes in modern Europe has been gathered together, and is kept up, by dreadful deeds of cruelty, injustice and fraud." Mr. Lilly is neither a Socialist nor a radical, but above all a pleader for law, while Mr. Devas was an un-



imaginative student of economics. If men of this character can write thus of titles to property in modern times, is it any wonder that St. Jerome used similar language in his day?

ST. JEROME DID NOT REJECT PRIVATE  
PROPERTY.

From the fact that St. Jerome believed the riches of his time to be the fruit of unjust dealing it does not follow that he regarded all individual property as wrong. It does not even follow that he regarded the possession of great riches as immoral in all circumstances. In the Commentary on Ecclesiastes he acknowledges that riches may be useful. "A wise man with riches has greater glory than one who is wise only. Some need wisdom and others, riches; and he who is wise and not rich can indeed teach what is proper, but sometimes he cannot perform what is asked."

“Wealth is not an obstacle to the rich man if he uses it well, nor does want make the poor man more praiseworthy, if in the midst of his filth and poverty he does not avoid sin. The example of Abraham, as well as daily instances about us, is a proof of this; the one was a friend of God in the midst of great riches, the others daily pay the penalty of crimes for which they are apprehended.”

St. Jerome clearly states here that a man may be a friend of God notwithstanding his great riches, provided he uses them properly. Nor is this a contradiction of the statements that we have already examined. There he was stating facts as he understood them; here he is laying down a general principle. It is one thing to say that no living rich man is honest, and another to say that no rich man can ever be honest. St. Jerome never expressed the latter opinion. In the same Epistle to Hedibia, in which he says that every rich man is unjust or the son of an unjust one, he has the following sentences: “Ananias and Saphira deserved the condem-

nation of the Apostle for secretly keeping back their property. 'Must he, therefore, be punished,' you will say, 'who will not give away his own?' By no means. They were punished because they wished to lie to the Holy Ghost, and sought vain glory, as if perfectly renouncing the world, although they had reserved what was necessary for their sustenance. For the rest, one is free to give or not to give." It must be noted that when St. Jerome says that a man is free to give or to keep his own, he is speaking of that portion of a man's goods that is necessary for his legitimate wants. He does not allow men the privilege of distributing or not distributing *superfluous* wealth. But there is in the passage just quoted a clear recognition of the principle of private ownership—that a man may hold and regard some things as his individual property. Moreover, St. Jerome often advises his wealthy friends to *sell* their possessions and

give the proceeds to the poor. If he believed all private property to be wrong, he could not honestly have given such counsel. This might, indeed, be a crude way of making restitution to the community, but it would be most unjust to the purchasers. St. Jerome would certainly not advise a transaction that would lead men to pay for something that they could not lawfully call their own. We conclude, therefore, that he does not question the right of individual ownership, though he was conscious of the glaring abuses of it practised in his time.

#### A RESULT OF ASCETICISM.

Nor can the severe denunciations of the rich—which are very abundant throughout Jerome's writings—be regarded as immoderate, if we take into account his character and the Christian teaching on the use of wealth. One need but read his Epistle to Eustochium to learn what an intense, un-

compromising nature was his. He is vigorous always, relentless always. He sleeps on the ground; his skin has become black as an Ethiopian's from the desert sun; he looks upon cooked food as a luxury; he beats his breast with sharp stones to drive out of his imagination the pictures of the old delights that his memory has carried over from decadent Rome. From other parts of his writing we learn that the practise of asceticism was one of the chief objects of his life, and that he devoted himself to it with all the ardor of his being. Hence we are not surprised that he should have a supreme contempt for material goods. The question of property titles and property rights was comparatively trifling to him. Besides, it was no part of his purpose to write a systematic treatise on the ethics of property. Theology had not yet been systematized. When writing on moral topics, St. Jerome, like the other Fathers of the Church, was con-

cerned with particular questions, and these were often treated in a very irregular and fragmentary manner. Moral theology on the whole was Scriptural and particular rather than scholastic and systematic. Consequently we do not expect to find in St. Jerome's writings scholastic exactness, calmness and proportion of parts.

Finally, in criticizing St. Jerome, it is well to bear in mind that his views on wealth were more correct than those that generally prevail to-day. He never forgot that the rich hold their wealth in trust. In common with the other Fathers he realized that the right of property, though exclusive, is not absolute. He kept in mind the great truth that a man's right to the bounty of nature is limited by the like rights of his fellows. The right of property is in a large measure social, implying correlative social obligations. This is a truth that the modern world has largely forgotten; hence it is surprised

when it finds St. Jerome using language that supposes such a doctrine. When we abstract from certain peculiarities of his manner of speaking, we cannot see that he differs essentially from St. Thomas, who has stated the conditions of legitimate ownership so briefly and clearly in his work, "Contra Gentiles":

"The possession of riches is not in itself unlawful if the order of reason be observed: that a man should *possess justly* what he owns, and *use* it in a proper manner for himself and others."<sup>1</sup>

All the other Fathers besides Basil, Ambrose and Jerome, taught the same doctrine as these three. That is, they all admitted private property to be just, although less perfect than common ownership, and they declared that private owners did wrong when they refused to distribute their surplus goods among the needy.

<sup>1</sup> Lib. 3, 123.