

THE FALL OF ROME

In *Antiquity* for September, 1934, is a translated article by Mons. Raymond Thouvenet on the last writer of the Roman Empire, whose book *On Divine Government* dates to about 450.

The position is amazingly like our own, and Salvian with accurate judgment sees the source of the evils in economics. The people were disarmed and in any case would not fight, but when conscripted, went over to the enemy. The ruling class was wiping itself out by birth control. Party conflicts led to the murder or supersession of any soldier who resisted invasion, and so on.

The troubles all arose from unjust taxation, imposed by the privileged upon the masses, which led in turn to seizure by the privileged class of the estates and livelihood of the middle class, for the poor were already slaves or, as *Bagaudae*, in armed revolt. "How can one describe such robbery and crime" at a time when the Roman Empire is dead, or in those parts which appear to be alive, expiring; when it has been strangled by taxation as if murdered by bandits—at such a time do most rich people pass on to the poor the payment of their taxes" (iv, 30).

Salvian "recognized quite clearly the disappearances of the primitive equality which had sustained all"; and that the privileged class, exempting themselves from taxes, were lending money for taxes to home owners and seizing the security by force or fraud in "a repetition throughout the Empire of precisely the same phenomenon as that which, in the last centuries of the republic, had ruined the free peasantry of Italy."

So arose the class "tied to the soil," once their own, or their tribe's. The owner gave them a portion, sharing the crops and costs, as in the Fascist "colonies" of to-day. But they could not leave, as their labour was the only security for payment of such part of the old land tax as the owner would settle. "Thus one watches the formation of two strata of the population. On the top is the landowner [fixing and evading taxation], 'the lord' one might almost call him now; below is the mass of half-free serfs, liable to arbitrary forced services. The peasants who parted with their liberty escape the direct rule of the State only to fall into the hands of an individual; it is the beginning of the Middle Ages and feudalism."

How the eagle eye of the Prophet of San Francisco, who probably never heard the name of Salvian, saw the period, and set it all out for us in a few lines of his incomparable prose!

M. J. S.