

The Theology and the History of the Commentaries of Paul's Letter to the Romans in the First Five Centuries

It has been repeated many times and by various scholars — Harnack¹, Lagrange², Lyonnet³ and recently Godsey⁴ — that the letter of Paul to the Romans, with the reflections and comments that have arisen, has stirred the emergence of the most salient moments of the history of christianity. In reality, this history could be studied through the history of the commentaries of the Pauline texts.

If all this has been noticed for some time, what remains to be understood is that why, more than the other texts, it is precisely the text of the *Letter to the Romans*, which has taken a very decisive role in the moments of the life of Christianity, moments so diverse in periods and historical conditions. In answering this question we deem it opportune to reread the Pauline epistle in order to discover new possible interpretative keys that might have stirred up the interests and the problems which, in the course of centuries, have been seen in this text, keys which may be specific and proper of this letter. Considering the deep motivation of the

¹ A. Von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, (trans. Neil Buchanan) Boston 1901, I. p. 136; Cfr. M. F., Wiles, *The divine Apostle, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles in the Early Church*, Cambridge, 1967.

² M. P. Lagrange, *Saint Paul. Epître aux Romains*, Paris, 1922, pp. VIII-XIV.

³ S. Lyonnet, *La Storia della salvezza nella lettera ai Romani*, Napoli. 1966, p. VII.

⁴ Y. D. Godsey, *The Interpretation of Romans in the History of Christian Faith*, in *Interpretation*, 34, 1980, pp. 3-16.

Christian authors, it is also opportune to read their works which are presented, either as reflections more or less explicitly based on the *Letter to the Romans*, or as true and exact commentaries of this text.

The facts we have about Paul's life, about his missionary activity, about his teaching and his personality are numerous, old and so full of contents that they offer to the students the possibility of continuous deepening. The primary sources of these data are the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the letters of Paul himself sent to different Christian communities.

The *Acts of the Apostles*, whose author is St. Luke, as agreed by all exegetes, dedicates fifteen (15) chapters to the life of St. Paul out of the 28 which compose it. The *corpus paulinum*, handed on to us by the canon, is composed of fourteen (14) writings including the *epistle to the Hebrews*, which although not written by St. Paul, is closely linked with his teaching.⁵

The letters of Paul, written to solve specific problems of some Christian communities regarding discipline and doctrine, are the most ancient Christian writings. Their editing goes back from the year 50 A.D. to the year 64-67. In our study of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, we will briefly recall some essential facts of the letter. Together with the *Letter to the Galatians*, it constitutes the text of the New Testament which, as we have already mentioned, has been often referred to, by the various historical trends of Christian thought.

According to some information given in Chapter 15, St. Paul wrote the *Letter to the Romans* while he was about to finish his third mission and was preparing to return to Jerusalem in the springtime of the year 58. Therefore with some probability the letter must have been written during the winter of 57-58 in Corinth (*Rom.* 15, 25; *Acts* 20, 3). When Paul edited it, he had already preached "the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum" (*Rom.* 15, 19) and was prepared to do his apostolate in the West, even as far as Spain. In this new journey, the part which he had so long desired to visit must have been the church of Rome.

Before undertaking this journey, Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem to take the money which the churches of the gentiles,

⁵ Cfr. Myles M. Bouche, *The Epistle to the Hebrews in The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Vol. II, pp. 381-382, New York, 1968.

founded by Paul himself, had purposely collected. This offering was supposed to be the sign of profound solidarity which linked the mother-church of Jerusalem, of the Judean-Christian matrix, to the Pagan-Christian community of Galatia, of Macedonia and of Achaia. The collection done by the pagan Christians in favor of the "poor among the saints in Jerusalem" (*Rom.* 15:26) was motivated by their awareness of being "debtors" of Jerusalem and "sharers of spiritual possessions" (*Rom.* 15:27) of the mother-church.

Paul presents himself to the community of Rome, which does not know him personally, as "apostle of the Gentiles" (*Rom.* 11:13) "wanting to bring the Good News to you too, in Rome" (*Rom.* 1:15). But the Gospel has already been announced in Rome and Paul knows that he is not the founder of that Christian community (*Rom.* 1:8-13; 15:20). It is believed that a Christian community was already founded in Rome around 43 A.D. by the traders converted from Judaism, coming from the Syrian-Palestinian region. It is probable that the expression "bring the Good News to you too, in Rome" (*Rom.* 1:15) indicates that in the Christian community of Rome, some difficulties between Judeo-Christians and Pagan-Christians have arisen, so that Paul feels the need of explaining again the Gospel, that is "the Good News" of the project of God which is the story of salvation.

The majority of scholars today, as in ancient times, have no doubt about the authenticity of the *letter*. The only difficulties lie in the formula "en Rome" (in Rome) (*Rom.* 1, 7.15); the doxology (*Rom.* 16, 25-27); the origin of chapter sixteen. Among the diverse solutions proposed for these problems, the most convincing are the following:⁶ the formula "in Rome" present in those codices where chapter sixteen (16) is not found, would indicate the text sent to the Roman church; while the text which has chapter 16, where "in Rome" is not found, is the copy which Phoebe was supposed to sent to Ephesus. In the most ancient manuscript P46, through which is transmitted to us the text of the *Letter to the Romans*, the verses *Rom.* 16, 1-24 are not found, and the doxology (*Rom.* 16, 25-27) is situated after *Rom.* 15, 33.

⁶ Y. Cambier, *L'épître aux Romains*, in *Introduction à la Bible-Nouveau Testament* (A. Robert - A. Feuillet) Tournai, 1959, pp. 454-458.

The *Letter to the Romans* is not a complete synthesis of the Paulinian concept of Christianity; nor is it an elementary and systematic catechism of Christian doctrine. In fact in this letter, Paul does not deal with some topics which are of great importance and which appear in his other letters instead; topics such as the Church, the Eucharist, the resurrection of the dead and eschatology. Paul assumed that these topics were already known. In the *Letter to the Romans*, the central theme is salvation of which Paul recalls its manifestation verified in history, until the coming of Christ, in Whom salvation, historically offered to all men, reaches its fulfillment.

1. *The Outline of the Letter to the Romans*

I would like to go back to it briefly so that the references which arise in the course of my study can be taken with more facility.

First; Paul presents God's salvific plan regarding man (Chap. 1-8); *then*, he talks about the incredulity of Israel — a problem which afflicts him very much (Chap. 9-11); and finally he goes back to the discourse about salvation, as it is manifested in the life of the redeemed (Chap. 12-15). We can say that the *Letter to the Romans* is therefore composed of 3 parts: 1st part *Rom.* 1-8; 2nd part *Rom.* 9-11; 3rd part *Rom.* 12-15.

First Part: Rom. 1-8

In order to present the development of God's salvific plan who desires the salvation of all men, Paul proceeds by forcefully bringing out this positive idea against the negative idea of man's misery before the coming of Christ.

In *Rom.* 1, 16-17, Paul has affirmed that the Gospel, or the Good News of salvation through Christ is, like Christ himself⁷ "a divine force which causes the salvation of every believer"⁸. With this expression Paul, pointing out to the Jews and Christian-Jews a well-noted concept which is the force of the Word of God who creates the world and maintains it in existence, shows the force, still greater, of the Gospel which is Christ Word and Christ

⁷ I Cor. 11, 14.

⁸ Cfr. A. Feuillet, *Le Plan salvifique de Dieu d'après l'épître aux Romains*, in *Rev. Bibl.* 57, 1950, pp. 336-387.

himself. Paul still affirms that in the "Gospel the justice of God is manifested". With this phrase he refers to the divine attribute of justice, commonly found in the Old Testament. It shows how the justice of God is, first of all, his merciful will, of being faithful to his promise of salvation; and secondly, how the justice of God could indicate that manifestation of the divine justice, which in punishing the infidelities of man to the pact, always shows, and even in a different way, the unique plan of love: that is, the salvation of humanity. To make clearer the realization of this divine plan, Paul presents the humanity as a sinner (*Rom.* 1-3) It deals with the first stage where the divine plan of salvation appears as a failure, and yet it is exactly this condition which is completely redeemed by God: (*Rom.* 5, 8: "But what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners").⁹ Many religions solved this opposition between light and darkness, between happiness and disgrace by a dualism provoked by 2 opposing principles, one of the good and the other of the evil; Judaism in its purest expression (*Is.* 40-50) solved it by reading a story in which every event, even the most tragic one, became recovered in the positive plan of God. Paul belongs to this religiosity when he discovers, right in the Paschal mystery of Christ, that superabundance of life which the love of the Father has given to humanity.

Thus in these first 8 chapters, Paul for 3 times, gives precedence to the proclamation of man's salvation through Christ, from the misery of humanity.

1) *Rom.* 1, 18-5, 11: the misery of every man as personally sinful, and salvation offered to men by God the Father through faith in Christ.

<i>Rom.</i> 1:18-32	the pagans are guilty
<i>Rom.</i> 2	the Jews are also guilty
<i>Rom.</i> 3, 1-20	all men are guilty
<i>Rom.</i> 3, 21-31	justification is by means of faith
<i>Rom.</i> 4	the figure of Abraham shows that justification through faith is already a reality in the Old Testament.
<i>Rom.</i> 5:1-12	the fruits of justification for the Christian

⁹ A. Feuillet, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

- 2) *Rom.* 5:12 to 7:6 the condition of misery for every man in solidarity with the sin of Adam and the condition of salvation of every man in solidarity with Christ, dead and risen.

<i>Rom.</i> 5:12-14	the sin of Adam
<i>Rom.</i> 5:15-17	the superiority of the gift of Christ
<i>Rom.</i> 5:15-17	Adam and Christ
<i>Rom.</i> 6:1-14	release from sin
<i>Rom.</i> 6:15-23	life of justice
<i>Rom.</i> 7:1-6	release from the Law

- 3) *Rom.* 7, 7-8, 39 The misery and helplessness of fallen man who has not been regenerated with the exigencies of the mosaic law; his liberation through the Spirit of Christ.
- Rom.* 7:7-12 The Law is good nevertheless, it permits man to be killed by sin, giving him the full knowledge of his faults.
- Rom.* 7:12-23 It is not the Law, therefore, that kills man but sin.
- Rom.* 7:24-25 Invoking for help
- Rom.* 8:1-17 Man's liberation through the Spirit as long as he lives the life of the Spirit.
- Rom.* 8:18-30 and although the person suffers, he is happy because he knows the end for which he suffers.
- Rom.* 8:31-39 One is sure of the love of God and of Christ.

It is rightly observed that in these first 8 Chapters we find ourselves confronted with a trinitarian outline:¹⁰ First (*Rom.* 1,18 to 5:11) the action of God the Father is put into evidence; then (*Rom.* 5:12-7:6) the action of Christ, the new Adam; therefore (*Rom.* 7:7-8) the action of the Spirit.

¹⁰ In L. Cerfaux, *La theologie de l'Eglise suivant Saint Paul*, Paris, 1942, p. 180; Cfr. Feuillet, *op. cit.*, pp. 386 & ff.

Second Part: Rom. 9-11

If in the first part Paul has showed the realization of God's plan for men taking each man as an individual, in this second part this same merciful plan of God is presented in relation to the people of Israel. Paul wants to show that Israel's refusal does not change God's plan; moreover, this refusal is temporary, and it is destined to favor the conversation of the Gentiles. And the chosen people of God¹¹ will return to Him.

Paul first affirms that Israel's refusal seen from God's view, does not contradict the promises of salvation (*Rom.* 9:6-13) and does not make God unjust (*Rom.* 9:14-18). On the contrary, it fully manifests who He is (*Rom.* 9:19-20). Then, Paul takes into consideration the refusal of Israel, as it appears according to human responsibility. From such point of view, the Jews are responsible because they have not recognized the value of faith and of the true justification (*Rom.* 9:30-10:4). Having to choose between justification through faith and justification through the Law, they learned on the latter (*Rom.* 10:5-13).

The Jews have therefore refused to believe in the Gospel, (*Rom.* 10:14-21). However, their refusal which has already been prophesized, (*Rom.* 11:1-10), has been partial, temporary and destined to favor the conversion rather than the pride of the Gentiles, and will end up with Israel's return to God.

In *Rom.* 11:28-32 Paul proposes again in synthesis the main theme of the whole letter: a) "God has imprisoned all men in their disobedience only to show mercy to all mankind"; b) The rebellion of the Jews, like that of the pagans before, has not changed his design of salvation, because his gifts are gratuitous and salvation is the gift par excellence; c) The rebellion of the pagans and the Jews has made clearer the mercy of God and his gift of salvation.

Between the first part and the second part of the letter, there is a profound doctrinal link, something which in the course of history has happened to every man, that is, the redemption of his reality as a sinner in the salvific design of God, is exactly what happens to Israel, considered as a collectivity, as a people.

¹¹ Cfr. A. Feuillet, *op. cit.*, pp. 489-506.

Third Part: Rom. 12-15

More than being a simple moral conclusion, this third part has the scope of presenting, once again, but through another means, the same salvific plan of God: Paul shows what God expects from the Christians, as members of the Church. The project of a new humanity is by now, after gift of the Spirit, a reality which only needs to be lived daily by Christians. The general principles, regarding the relations between Christians and non-Christians (*Rom. 12,16-13*) and finally the relations between "the strong" and "the weak" within the community (*Rom. 14-15,13*) want only to indicate that the realization of a new humanity is entrusted to man, who through faith in Christ, becomes the beneficiary of the divine plan of salvation.

2. *Theophilus of Antioch's consideration of the significance of the Letter to the Romans in understanding the person of St. Paul*

Up to now, we have briefly attempted a re-reading of the *Letter to the Romans*. Perhaps it might help us understand more clearly the importance that the figure and thought of Paul have had since the first generations of Christianity, by recalling what Jerome says¹² of the commentary attributed to Theophilus of Antioch about the parable of the unfaithful steward (*Lk. 16:1-9*)

Theophilus, the seventh successor of St. Peter in the church of Antioch, comments thus: "the rich man who had a steward is the Omnipotent God whom nobody surpasses in wealth. His steward was Paul, who, educated by Gamaliel, from whom he has learned the scriptures, has received the faculty to administer the Law of God, (the Revelation). But since he engaged himself in persecuting, imprisoning and killing the believers of Christ and in dissipating the substance of the revelation of God — he was caught by surprise: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (*Acts 9:4*) Then Paul, with all his heart said: "What shall I do now? I, who have been a teacher and steward, I see myself compelled to be a disciple and a laborer. I have no strength to work on the soil. In fact I see that all the precepts of the Law,

¹² St. Jerome, *Ep. 121 Ad Algasiam, quest. 6*. For the commentary of Origen to the Letter to the Romans and for Rufinus' translation see F. Cocchini, *Origene. Commento alla lettera ai Romani. Annuncio Pasquale. Polemica antieretica*, L'Aquila, 1979.

which are inherent to the land, are destroyed and that the Law and the prophets have ended with John the Baptist. I am ashamed to beg because he who has been a teacher of the Jews is now seen begging for the doctrine of faith and of justification (*fidei et salutis*) from the Gentiles and from the disciple Ananias. Therefore I will do what I see will be useful, because when I will be sent away from the stewardship, the Christians will receive me in their homes. So, to those who before were of the Law and had believed in Christ, he started to teach that the Law had been abolished and that which was a gain before, must be considered a dung (*Ph.* 3:8). Then he called two among the many debtors: first was one who owed the Lord 100 barrels of oil, that is, those who were called gentiles and who needed the great mercy of God. From one hundred, a number which is full and perfect, he made the debtor write fifty, which is precisely the number of penitents, according to the jubilee and to the parable in the Gospel where to one is forgiven 500 denarii and another fifty (*Lk.* 7:41-42). For the second debtor, he then called the Jews who were nourished by the wheat of the commandments of God. They owed him 100 denarii but he ordered them to write eighty. This means that they believe in the resurrection of the Lord which is represented by the eighth day and will be fulfilled after eight decades to pass from Saturday to the first day after Saturday. For this reason he is praised by the Lord, because he has reacted well and for his salvation he was passed from the rigour of the Law to the clemency of the Gospel. If then you ask why Paul is called steward of iniquity in that Law that is God's (I answer you) that as a steward, he was bad. Paul offered (the Scriptures) well but he was not just in the division which he made. He believed in the Father but persecuted the Son; he possessed the omnipotent God but denied the Holy Spirit. By transgressing the Law, Paul was then more prudent than than those who were sons of the light. They were too preoccupied about the observance of the Law that they lost Christ, who is the true light of God the Father".

From this testimony attributed to Theophilus, it is understood that the importance given to Paul in the economy of the story of salvation was due to his way of relating with the Hebrews and the Gentiles. In fact to these two groups of people he had announced:

- a) that they are debtors of God
- b) that they are justified by the mercy of God.¹³

It has been seen that it is exactly these two announcements which constitute the specific theme of the *Letter to the Romans*: Paul puts these two debtors in the condition of being able to settle their own debt and he is therefore praised by the master. This application of the parable of the unfaithful steward to Paul seems to have been done by Theophilus precisely after considering how much Paul had written in the *Letter to the Romans*. In other words, the parable narrated in Lk. 16:1-9 could be, for Theophilus, a new key to the reading of the most profound message of the Pauline letter: This would announce the new created rapport in Christ between the Hebrews and the Gentiles and the redemption of every negative reality by the Father through Christ.

3. *The Letter to the Romans in the Works of Irenaeus and in the Epistle of Diognetus*

Origen alone offers a systematic commentary to the *Letter to the Romans* in the first three centuries. This has been transmitted to us by the translation of Rufinus of the fifth century.¹⁵ In spite of this, the Pauline text was already present in the writing of the Fathers of this period not only with abundant quotations and references, as in the case of Irenaeus,¹⁴ Tertullian,¹⁵ Cyprian,¹⁶ and Clement of Alexandria,¹⁷ but also through the revival of the main theme of the letter itself. Sinful humanity, as represented by the pagans and Jews, is redeemed by the salvific design of God through Christ. This is what is verified in the so-called *Epistle to Diognetus*,¹⁸ which belongs to the second half of the second century of the same period to which the commentary of Theophilus on the parable of Luke belongs. Through the twelve chapters of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, its anonymous author responds to some questions about the religion of the Christians:

¹³ II Cor., 10,5

¹⁴ E. Peretto, *La lettera ai Romani*, cc. 1-8 nell' *Adversus Haereses d'Ireneo*, Bari, 1971, and *La Biblia Patristica*, I, pp. 422-444.

¹⁵ Cfr. *Biblia Patristica*, I, pp. 428-444.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁷ Cfr. *Biblia Patristica*, II, pp. 363-375.

¹⁸ M. G. Mara, *Osservazioni sull' 'Ad Diognetum'*, in SMSR 35, 1964, pp. 267-279; Cfr. S. Zincone, *A Diogneto*, Rome, 1977.

- 1) Who is the God in whom they believe, and what is the nature of the worship they give?
- 2) Why don't the Christians care about the world and why do they look down on death?
- 3) Why do they break off from the traditional pagan and Judean cult?
- 4) What is the nature of their mutual love?
- 5) Why is the style of life of the Christians manifested only now and not before?

The author asks God for the capacity to answer with facility the questions of Diognetus and that the latter could listen to him and become better.

The themes presented in the first four chapters of the *Letter to the Romans* can be found one by one in the *Epistle to Diognetus*. They are: the sin of the Gentiles, or the idolatry understood as mystification of the relation of man with God (*Rom.* 1:8-32 and *Ad Diogn.* III); the equality of paganism and Judaism in their religious faults (*Rom.* 3:1-31 and *Ad Diogn.* IV); the final exhortation to receive from the risen Lord that salvation which man cannot achieve by himself alone (*Rom.* 4:25 and *Ad Diogn.* IV, 4).¹⁹

The Jewish guilt, as pointed out by the author of *Ad Diognetus*, is the same as the pagan guilt referred to by the book of Wisdom (13:7). The pagans have stopped at something temporary, at the beauty that passes away (Wisdom 13:37). And in so doing, they have lost that which is definitive, that is, the power of him who has created the beautiful things. (Wisdom 13:3-5). From the Biblical point of view, the pagans and the Jews represent the entire humanity. Like the *Letter to the Romans*, the *Epistle to Diognetus* also affirms that both are sinners because they have not grasped the instrumental character of things through which God is manifested: firstly, the cosmos; secondly, the sacrifices and the rites. But when sinful humanity shows its lack of strength to rise, it is restored gratuitously in the salvific plan of God, by the "mystery" of Christ's incarnation, passion, death and glorification. In chapter IX of *Ad Diognetus* the story of salvation is presented in synthesis as it appears in the *Letter to the Romans*.

¹⁹ M. G. Mara, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-274.

Ad Diogetus reads:

"Having thus planned everything by himself together with his Son, he allowed us up to the time before the coming of the Savior to be borne along by unruly impulses as we willed, carried away by pleasures and lust (cfr. *Rom.* 3, 21-26). Not because he delighted in our sins, but because he tolerated us (*Rom.* 3,26). He did not approve that time of iniquity but he was preparing us for the present time of righteousness. This he did so that we, who at that time were proven by our own deeds to be unworthy of life, may now be granted it by the goodness of God, and that when we had made it plain that it was impossible by ourselves alone to enter into the kingdom of God, we might do so by the power of God. But when the time appointed reached its peak (*Rom.* 5:6-8) and it had become fully manifest that man deserved punishment and death (*Rom.* 6:23), and when the time came which God had appointed to manifest henceforth his goodness and power, (Oh the excellence of the kindness and the love of God!) he did not hate us nor reject us, nor remember us for evil, but was long-suffering. He endured us; in pity he himself took our sins; he himself gave his Son as ransom for us (cfr. *Rom.* 8:32), the Holy for the wicked, the innocent for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins but his righteousness? In whom was it possible for us, in our wickedness and impiety, to be made just (*Rom.* 4:5) except in the Son of God alone? Oh the sweet exchange, Oh the inscrutable depths (*Rom.* 11, 33). Oh the unexpected benefits! that the wickedness of many should be concealed in one righteous, and the righteousness of one should make many wicked righteous! (*Rom.* 5,18 ss) (*Ad Diognetus*, IX, 1-5)²⁰

It is said in *Ad Diognetus* I, that the Christians constitute "a new race" or a new "system of life", according to that "newness" many times indicated in the New Testament and also mentioned in *Rom.* 6:4 with the expression "walk in the newness of life".²¹ To such newness of the Christian life, the author of *Ad Diognetus* dedicates Chapters V and VI. By describing the unusual mode of life, he actually presents a new humanity whose characteristics are synthesized in the expression "they are of the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh" (*Ad Diogn.* v, 8)

²⁰ *Ad Diogn.*, IX, 1-5.

²¹ *Ad Diogn.*, II, 1 *Eph.* 4, 22-24.

which echoes *Rom.* 8:12-13: "So, then, my brothers, you are debtors, but not of the flesh, to live according to the flesh. If you live that way you are doomed to die, but if by the Spirit you put an end to the misdeeds of the body, you will live."²²

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons from the end of the second century to the beginning of the third, is remembered even if he has not made a systematic commentary to the *Letter to the Romans*. In his work *Adversus Haereses* he appeals to the testimony of Paul, particularly chapters 1-8 of the *Romans*, to combat agnosticism. Irenaeus emphasizes the principle of unity in these texts. The God of the Old and the New Testament is only one; the Christ, God-man in the mystery of his Incarnation, is only one; the Holy Spirit who operates in man is only one.²³

4. *Greek Commentaries of the Letter to the Romans*

The first systematic commentator of Paul, and of the *Letter to the Romans*, which interests us here, is Origen. His commentary to the Pauline epistle, as has already been briefly indicated, is transmitted to us by the Latin translation of Rufinus who has partly altered the original work reducing to 10, the 15 books written by the *Alexandrian* in Greek. The motive of the *origenian* commentary of the *Letter to the Romans* is before everything else, an attempt to comment on all the books of the Scriptures. We will go back later to the contents of this work and to a particular interpretation which it proposes.

Apolinaris of Laodicea (310-390 A.D.), one of the exponents of the Nicene orthodoxy in Syria, has some fragments regarding the *commentaries* of the various Pauline epistles; one of them is the *Letter to the Romans*. There are 36 fragments concerning this letter. They are found in the Bodleian chain brought by Cramer²⁴ and reveal an exegesis which is prevalently a literal type. The disappearance of the entire commentary, and of a great part of the other works of Apolinaris, could be attributed to the condemnation of his Christological doctrines by the Council of Constantinople of 381.

²² *II Cor.*, 10, 3.

²³ E. Peretto, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-172.

²⁴ C. H. Turner, *Greek Patristic Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles*, in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. I. Hastings, extra vol., New York, 1906, p. 500; Cfr. K. H. Schelkle, *Paulus Lehrer Der Vater*, Dusseldorf, 1959.

Theodore of Mopsuestia was born in Antioch towards the year 350 and he was consecrated bishop in 392. He was esteemed and admired during his lifetime, above all, for his exegetical works. Nevertheless, less than a century after his death, he was accused of Nestorianism and finally condemned in the year 553. Such a condemnation had as a result the loss of the greater part of his works. Eleven fragments of his commentary of the *Letter to the Romans* have reached us.²⁵ They show a type of exegesis in which the historical interest prevails over the spiritual.

John Chrysostom, about the year 391, transmits to us the first complete systematic commentary in Greek. Through thirty-two homilies, given in church after a continued reading of the *Letter to the Romans*, he comments on the text first with a literal exegesis, then, with a spiritual and moralistic actualisation. Chrysostom's admiration for St. Paul is evident in this work²⁶ but it is also clear how he is not so much worried about grasping the theological depth as of exalting the figure of Paul as an apostle, as a teacher of Christian life, as a pastor of souls.²⁷

Since Cyril of Alexandria's commentary to the *Letter to the Romans* remains in small fragments only, he has not been included in this study. However, greater attention is due to Theodoret of Cyrus whose systematic commentary to the Pauline text, possibly dated on the first half of the fifth century, has reached us. Two characteristics seem to emerge from this commentary: its briefness and the lack of originality. As he himself says in the introduction, the briefness is due to the attention he wants to have with regards to the lazy readers; the lack of originality springs instead from the desire, openly declared, to collect whatever was better said before him in the school of Antioch.²⁸

²⁵ C. H. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 508-512; H. B. Swete, *Theodori episcopi Mopsuesteni in Epistulas B. Pauli commentarii*, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1880-1882; K. Staab, *Paulus Kommentare aus der Griechischen Kirche*, Munster, 1933, pp. 113-172.

²⁶ Cfr. Isidore of Pelusium, PG 78, 1368 A.

²⁷ C. H. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 501-507; A. Merzagora, *Giovanni Crisostomo in Didaskaleion*, Nuova Serie 10, 1931, pp. 1-73; S. Zincone, *Giovanni Crisostomo. Commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, L'Aquila, 1980.

²⁸ Theodoret, *Praef. in omnes Epistulas* I, 3 (PG 82, 37).

5. *Latin Commentaries of the Letter to the Romans*

It is the West which has handed down to us the greatest number of commentaries of the *Letter to the Romans*.²⁹ We will mention briefly Caius Marius Vittorinus, who was converted to Christianity towards 355 when he was already a famous rhetorician. He is the first Latin commentator of Paul. From his commentaries of the letters to the *Ephesians*, to the *Galatians*, to the *Philippians*, it is deduced that he must have commented also on the *Letter to the Romans*, and the first and the second letter to the Corinthians, but such works have not reached us. His exegesis is literal, with scarce use of the Scriptural references, perhaps as a reaction to the allegorical Alexandrian exegesis³⁰ or more simply because he did not possess a complete and profound knowledge of the Old Testament.

It seems interesting to recall immediately that between 360 and 410 in a span of 50 years, a sign of the rediscovery of Paul in the West is given precisely by the numerous commentaries dedicated to his epistolary, and in particular to the *Letter to the Romans*; from that of the Ambrosiaster to that of an anonymous letter handed down in a code of Budapest,³¹ and from that of Augustine to that of Pelagius.

Such interest could also be observed by the insistence with which the priest Simplician, future Bishop of Milan, has asked Ambrose to comment to the people on the Pauline texts. The same request was also made in 397 more than ten years after, to Augustine. He was asked to clarify some difficult passages of the *Letter to the Romans* (*Rom.* 7:7-25; 9:10-29).³²

In the commentary of the Ambrosiaster,³³ it is to be noticed how this anonymous author insists in a particular way on the divi-

²⁹ For the Latin commentaries to the Letter to the Romans vide A. Souter, *The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul*, Oxford, 1927.

³⁰ F. Gori, *Per il testo dei Commentari in Apostolum di Mario Vittorino*, in *Riv. di Filol.*, Turin, 104, 1976, pp. 149-162; W. Erdt, *Marius Victorinus Afer, der erste lateinische Paulus — Kommentator. Studien zu seinen Paulus Kommentaren im Zusammenhang der Wiederentdeckung des Paulus in der abendländischen Theologie des 4. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1980.

³¹ H. J. Frede, *Ein neuer Paulustext und Kommentar*, I-II, Freiburg, 1973-1974.

³² St. Ambrose, *Ep.* 7; Vide also M. M. Mara *L'interpretazione ambrosiana di Rom. 1,20 in Paradoxos Politeia, Studi patristici in onore di Giuseppe Lazzati*, Milan, 1979, pp. 419-435.

³³ Cfr. A. Pollastri, *Ambrosiaster, Commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, L'Aquila, 1977; *Il Prologo del commento alla lettera ai Romani dell' Ambro-*

nity of Christ and on his redemptive work. This is very understandable if the historical context of the work is recalled. It is the period after the Council of Nicea but with the Apollinarian controversy going on. The presentation of a christology, precisely based on the Pauline text, with emphasis on how Christ, as man and as God, fulfilled the prophecies: he lived in history, died, rose and descended to hell to free men. Such a Christology allows the Ambrosiaster to draw the lines of an anthropology that shows man justified only by faith and not by the works of the Law.

Even Augustine emphasizes in his various attempts to comment on the *Letter to the Romans*, the gratuitousness and the universality of salvation in Christ. In 394 he had thought of offering a true and appropriate commentary of the *Letter to the Romans*. In reality, he limited himself to explaining briefly with a literal exegesis only some passages.³⁴ He went back to this text of Paul the same year,³⁵ perhaps with the intention of commenting it verse by verse, but again he stopped, awed by the task still undone. He had already dedicated an entire book to Rom. 1:1-7.

Later,³⁶ Simplician presented other questions, two of which were about the interpretation of the *Letter to the Romans*. The first was about chapter seven and the second was about chapter 9. The former dealt with clarifying the relation which exists between the law of Moses and that of Christ. Against the *Manicheans*, Augustine affirms that it is not a question of two laws, but of one and the same law "promulgated by Moses so that it would be feared, and by Christ, grace and truth, so that it would be fulfilled".³⁷ In the second question Augustine emphasizes the gratuitousness of grace with regards to deeds, and he puts grace at the beginning of faith and of the same desire for conversion.

Augustine's reflections on the *Letter to the Romans*,³⁸ on one hand, connects with the traditional theme of the justification of

siaster, in SSR II, 1, 1978, pp. 93-127. For the relations between Christians and Jews in the commentary of the Ambrosiaster vide SSR IV, 1980, pp. 313-327.

³⁴ St. Augustin, *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex Epist. ad Romanos*.

³⁵ St. Augustin, *Epistulae ad Romanos inchoata expositio*.

³⁶ St. Augustin, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*.

³⁷ Cfr. A. Pincherle, *Vita di Sant' Agostino*, Bari, 1980, p. 156.

³⁸ Vide chapters 5-6 in *De remissione peccatorum* (year 412); chapters 7-8 in *De spiritu et littera* (year 412); vide also *Ep.* 194 (circa 418).

men and the work of the mercy of God in Christ. On the other hand, he makes clear the force of the Manichean polemics and the problems of spreading asceticism and monasticism between the old and the new law, between faith and works, or still between faith-predestination-grace on one hand and man's liberty on the other.

This last point should be connected with the commentary of Pelagius on the *Letter to the Romans* written at the beginning of the fifth century. Pelagius attenuates the doctrine of grace present in the text of Paul, (chapters 5-7), to emphasize the capacities of human nature and free will. With this purpose he affirms that God, with the action of grace, does not substitute himself with the action of man's freedom; that man is a sinner because he "imitates" the sin of Adam, not because it is transmitted to him; that predestination is understood as divine pre-science, because God has not preference for persons and the faith, which saves, depends on man.³⁹

6. *Principal Causes for the presence of the Commentaries of the Letter to the Romans in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*

After this brief synthesis of the patristic commentaries during the fourth and fifth centuries on the *Letter to the Romans*, we would like to emphasize now the aspects of this epistle, center of great patristic reflections. Thus, it would be interesting to note how particular questions already present in the Pauline text, emerge from time to time, as punctualizations of the central theme. These are deepened by the Fathers according to diverse historical and theological exigencies. We have for example, the insistence of Irenaeus on the unity of the Testaments due to antimarcionist polemics. There is also the continuous appeal of the Ambrosiaster to the divinity of Christ against the polemics with Judaism.⁴⁰ Then, the insistence on the moral point of Chrysostom, due to pastoral exigencies; the insistence on the theme of grace and works in Augustine, motivated by his interest for man and exasperated by the polemics with Pelagius.

³⁹ A. Souter, *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul*, YTS, IX/2, Cambridge, 1962. Very interesting notes of Pelagius's commentary to Paul's Letter to the Romans in G. De Plinval, *Pelage. Ses écrits, sa vie, sa réforme*, Lausanne-Geneve, 1943.

⁴⁰ Vide A. Pollastri, *Sul rapporto...*, p. 324, n. 51; Cfr. M. Simon, *Verus Israel. Etude sur les relations entre chrétiens et juifs dans l'empire romain*, Paris, 1964, pp. 155-162; 245-274; 334-341.

The above study presented by us brings into evidence some data: 1) In the second and third centuries, the appeal to the letter of Paul to the Romans is present in a singular way in Theophilus. However in the *Epistle to Diognetus* and in Irenaeus,⁴¹ it appears fragmentarily. It is only in Origen that the commentary of the *Letter to the Romans* and of the other letters of Paul is systematic. But the fact that Origen had commented Paul is not due to a particular theological and historical situation of his period. Such works of Origen are explained easily as having the intention of commenting the whole Bible. The limited presence of Pauline *corpus* in the second and third centuries has been explained as a consequence of the reaction on the part of the Church to the utilisation of Paul done by the Marcionite heresy and the gnostic circle. Besides, if the Marcionites and the gnostics appealed to the authority of Paul to guarantee their doctrine, a strong anti-paulinism sprung up instead in some Judeo Christian circles due to the negative judgment of Paul with regards to the works of the law.⁴² Even this circumstance must have caused a limited and attentive use of pauline corpus by the Fathers of the Church of the second and third centuries.

2) In the fourth and fifth centuries we have noticed a greater interest for the letters of Paul and particularly for the *Letter to the Romans*. This fact does not seem casual, if we think that the authors, like C. M. Vittorinus, The Ambrosiaster and Pelagius, are not preoccupied about commenting the whole Bible, but have dedicated their exegetical works in a systematic manner only to the letters of Paul. What are the motives which can have pushed the Fathers of the Church to dedicate, in a period of 50 years, ten good commentaries (or translations of commentaries, as in the case of Rufinus) to the *Letter to the Romans*? Can it be sufficient to give as a motivation the disappearance of the danger presented by the Marcionites and the gnostics?

A rereading of the religious history of the fourth century brings into evidence the fact that diverse phenomena urged the return to the pauline *corpus* to seek and to offer explanations and solutions.

⁴¹ The Letter to the Romans is also mentioned in Tertullian, Cyprian, Methodius of Olympus and others.

⁴² Cfr. *The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*.

A first phenomenon is that of the heresies. The most explicit and most complete declaration of the usefulness of the *Letter to the Romans* to attack the heresies is in the commentary of the Ambrosiaster. From the text of Paul, he takes the elements to refute the heresies of Marcion, Fotinus, the Jews, Manicheans, Donatists, etc.,⁴³ in other words, the heresies and schisms in which, by the strength of a dualism of a very diverse nature, they oppose each other, or refuse the humanity (Marcion) and the divinity (the Jews) of Christ; the Old and the New Testament, the God of both alliances (Marcion and Mani); the church of the pure and the *permixta* (donatists); the moral rigor for the imminence of the last times and the institutional reflection of the Church in the history; the new and the old Jerusalem (priscillianists).

A second phenomenon is that of mutual proselytism between Jews and Christians.⁴⁴ Such proselytism in the East as well as in the West, sometimes provoked heterodox situations of syncretism. The transformation of a synagogue into a church in Rome, appears as something significant if we remember the role played by the Hebrew Isaac during the pontificate of Pope Damasus and perhaps the Judean origin of the same pope Zosimus.⁴⁵ These converted Hebrews brought to the church their customs and cultural heritage. We know from the Ambrosiaster and from one of the Pelagian writings⁴⁶ that in some Judeo-Christian circles the fact of being children of Abraham and observers of the precept of circumcision was a guarantee of salvation, because the observance of the Law, even without the grace of Christ, was enough to be justified by God. From John Chrysostom,⁴⁷ we learn that some Christians celebrated the great feasts with the Hebrews and from Augustine,⁴⁸ we know about the existence of Christian groups in Northern Africa that wanted to be called Jews. They followed the law and the Hebrew customs and, above all, emphasized the

⁴³ Vide A. Pollastri, *Il prologo...*, pp. 123 & ff.

⁴⁴ Vide J. Juster, *Les juifs dans l'Empire Romain*, Paris, 1914, pp. 277 & ff.

⁴⁵ Cfr. G. Morin, *L'Ambrosiaster et le juif converti Isaac*, in RHLR, 4, 1899, pp. 97-121.

For the return of the Hebrew Isaac to Judaism cfr. St. Jerome, *Comm. in Ep. ad Titum*, 3, 9. Cfr. L. Duchesne, *Histoire ancienne de l'Eglise*, Paris, 1910, III, p. 228, n. 1.

⁴⁶ Cfr. Ambrosiaster, *Quaest.* 44; 127: Pseudo-Pelagio, *Epistula de vera circumcisione* (PL 30, 188-210).

⁴⁷ St. J. Chrysostom, *Adv. Judeos* 3.

⁴⁸ St. Augustin, *Ep.* 196, 4, 16 to bishop Asellcius (year 418).

value of works. A clarification to the problems which came about from such situations could be given in an unequivocal way by a re-reading of the *Letter of Paul to the Romans*.

A third phenomenon which calls for this re-reading is the abolition of paganism from the Empire with the resulting mass conversion of the pagans to Christianity. These converts sought from the new religion the assurances of salvation. To meet such requests, the Church at times had to limit the demands of a true and personal Christian life to a profession of faith only. This is deduced from *De fide et operibus* of Augustine⁴⁹ where the bishop of Hippo sustains the importance, in a pre-baptismal catechism, of an explicit reference to the new moral behavior asked of a Christian. Even in this case it is to Paul that one group and the other appealed: the first emphasized those expressions in which the Apostle declared that faith was enough for one's salvation; the others, recalled how the same Paul insisted on the condemnation of sin and on his moral exhortations.

As to the need for a greater adhesion and personal conviction required of a christian, one of the most characteristic movements of the fourth century is monastic asceticism. It deals with a phenomenon which has contributed to the rise of interest for Paul and concretely for the *Letter to the Romans*. In fact, monasticism, given the importance attributed to the will of man in the area of ascesis, sometimes arrived at an over-appraisal of human component within the area of justification. This appears in the commentary of Pelagius to the *Letter to the Romans*. Followed by those monks of Adrumetus and Marseilles for whom Augustine writes four works⁵⁰ with the attempt to clarify that grace does not take away the free will but that it remains gratuitous even when man's merits are rewarded.

In contrast with the Pelagian's idea which binds salvation to the observance of moral precepts and to the practice of ascesis, the Church, through Augustine, recovers in the letters of Paul that announcement of a salvation which, as fruit of mercy, is universal. It precedes, sustains and awaits the response of man.

⁴⁹ St. Augustin, *De fide et operibus* XII, 18.

⁵⁰ St. Augustin, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*; *De correptione et gratia*; *De Praedestinatione sanctorum*; *De dono perseverantiae*.

As it is noted, certain aspects of the *Letter to the Romans* acquire greater importance from the fourth century onwards. They are: those which concern the solution of dualistic radicalism, the relation between the Jews and pagans in the history of salvation, the relation between faith and deeds in justification, or in other words, between grace and free will. The various commentaries favor now one side, now the other. They are, from time to time, attempts of responses to the problems provoked by the Christianised Jews, Judaizers, by the pagan catechumens and by the Christians (especially those dedicated to the ascetico-monastic life) who, while denouncing the spread of immorality, think with nostalgia of the persecuted martyrs and of the faith and the customs of the primitive community.

I would like to present now a particular aspect of the commentary of Origen which gives pre-eminence to the central nucleus of the message of Paul in the *Letter to the Romans*, and also the interpretations which developed in the course of the first five centuries about one of those problems which, even if present in the letter, is only a marginal part of the main theme. It deals with the interpretation of Rom. 13:1-7, the passage in which Paul deals with the relation between the christian and authority.

7. *The Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Commentary of Origen of the letter to the Romans*

Through the analysis of some passages of the commentary of Origen of the *Letter to the Romans* we will try to identify what for Origen would be the main theme of the Pauline letter. In the preface to his *commentary* he already brings into evidence the theme of gratuitousness and the universality of salvation brought by God in Christ. Such salvation prescind completely from the merits of man, either good or bad in nature, as what the gnostics wanted, either a follower or not of the Law, according to the importance which the Jews attributed to this reality, but it is a fruit of faith. Thus, it is precisely what the Romans — typical exponents of paganism — have demonstrated with regards to faith, that Paul can, in the beginning of his *Letter*, give thanks with the words of Rom. 1,8: "First I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you and for the way in which your faith is spoken of, all over the world".

The stress is particularly placed on the historical-salvific significance of the conversion of the Romans, whose faith "is proclaimed all over the world". To explain this last expression, Origen proposes three interpretations. According to the first, the literal one, the phrase would indicate that the faith of the Romans is announced on earth; in the second interpretation, Origen involves the angelical powers: the verse of Luke refers to this "They show more joy for the sinner who repents" (Lk. 15:20) to indicate their joy for the conversion and for the faith of the Romans; the third interpretation finally sees that the faith which the Romans profess is exactly that which is announced and believed in heaven and on earth.

The verse of Luke which closes the parable of the drachma, is therefore utilized to bring into evidence the participation of the heavenly powers, in the joy of the conversion and the faith of the Romans, and in Romans of all the pagans.⁵¹ This means that their approach to the faith, and therefore to salvation, which is evident in the allusion to the parable, is immediately considered by Origen as the fundamental theme of the *letter*.

Such theme appears again in the commentary of *Rom.* 2:12-13 and is once again a parable of mercy, that of the prodigal son (*Lk.* 15). This permits Origen to deepen the Pauline discourse. The text of Paul is the following: "Sinners who were not subject to the law will perish just the same without that Law: Sinners who were under the Law will have that Law to judge them. It is not listening to the Law but keeping it that will make people holy in the sight of God." The text of Paul puts three questions to Origen.

- 1) Who are those who, having sinned without the law, will perish also without the law?
- 2) Who are those who, having sinned under the law, shall be judged by means of the law?
- 3) How is it that those who have sinned without the law seem to be struck by a more serious sentence, since some of them it is said that "they will perish", while they seemed to be the ones needing more help?

⁵¹ Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* I, 9; Vide M. G. Mara, *Parabole lucane della misericordia nel commento di Origene alla lettera ai Romani*, in *Augustinianum* 2, 1978, pp. 311-319.

To the first two questions, Origen responds by clarifying that it deals with the Gentiles first, and then the Jews. But according to the Pauline text, it seems to affect the Gentiles and the Jews. This led Origen to formulate the third question. To this he finds an answer in diverse Scriptural passages, among which is the parable of the prodigal son. This would synthesize in a particular manner the position in the history of salvation of the Gentiles and the Jews: both are sinners.

Origen writes "The father rejoices for the younger son who has repented, who was dead and has returned to life; was lost and is found (*Lk.* 15, 14). He rejoices more than for the one who was not lost and has not been found. And I think that this younger son is by now delivered from the same natural law. This seemed to be indicated by the fact that he had consumed the share of the patrimony of his father by living luxuriously".⁵²

From the parable of Luke, Origen takes into consideration three personages: the father, the younger son and the older son, leaving out every reference to other elements (such as the calf, the stole, music, etc.) which at various times have been interpreted by him allegorically in his other works. The presence of the parable in the *commentary of the letter to the Romans* seems therefore to be reduced to principal personages. The father is God, who seeks and finds, gives life to one who is dead, and rejoices. The appeal to the natural law permits us to understand easily that the younger son is the type of the gentile who having lost the same natural law, can appear according to the text of Paul as "without law" and should therefore perish "without the law". However, the fact that from the parable it follows that such a son is found and is back to life, helps Origen to show that his punishment is not then rougher than that which is allotted to the other son who is the representative of the Jews.

It would therefore be a utilization of the parable of the prodigal son in a specifically historical-salvific sense; but the parable would be used more particularly, to clarify that aspect of the history of salvation which Paul calls "the mystery" and that, as has been said, constitutes the central theme of the *Letter to the Romans*, that is, the relation of the two sons with the father here

⁵² Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* II, 8.

would represent the story of two peoples, Gentiles and Jews, both called by diverse means to participate in the intimacy of the Father.

It seems to us finally interesting to note how the parable of Luke of the prodigal son is utilized by Origen in the same sense in which the parable of the unfaithful servant was used by Theophilus. In both cases we are faced with two christian authors, one of the second century and the other of the third century, who have wanted to translate in evangelical terms the Pauline announcement of the *Letter to the Romans*.

8. *The History of the Christian — Authority Rapport in Rom. 13:1-7*

The reflection on the position of the christian regarding civil authority is already present in the second century and has as a point of departure the Bible. To show how authority comes from God, the authority which emanates laws and exercises justice, some texts of the Old and the New Testament are quoted, in which it is said that those who govern should know that "power is a gift to you from the Lord" (*Wis. 6:1-11*) and they govern for the Lord (*Prov. 8:15-16*); that the christian prays for the one who governs (*I Tim. 2:2*) and that the Christian obeys the one who governs (*Titus 3:1-2*; *I Peter 2:13-17*). But it is also necessary that the Christians know that the designation of the person who incarnates such authority is not always according to God (*Os. 8:4*). Among the Scriptural quotations used to clarify the relation between the christian and civil power, the most frequent are those of *Matthew 22:21*⁵³ with the *logion* "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God", and from *Rom. 13:1-7*.⁵⁴ I will dwell only on the patristic interpretation of this last passage.⁵⁵ Let us recall some expressions: "you must obey the governing authorities. Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God, and so any one who resists authority is rebelling against God's decision.... Being a minister of God, (the authority) should punish the wrongdoer...

⁵³ *Mt. 22, 21*. For parallels see *Mc. 12,13-17*; *Lc. 20,21-25*.

⁵⁴ For a possible dependency of Paul from the *logion* of *Mt. 22,21* vide K. Romaniuk, *Il cristiano e l'autorità civile in Rom. 13,1-7*, in *Riv. Bibl. XXVII*, 1979, pp. 261-269

⁵⁵ Cfr. Juan Picca, *Romanos 13,1-7. Un texto discutido*, Roma, 1980; M. G. Mara, *Bibbia e Storia nel IV secolo*, in the process of publication.

You should also pay taxes since all government officials are God's officers. Pay every government official what he has a right to ask — whether it be direct tax or indirect, fear or honour". With these affirmation Paul does not seem so preoccupied to impart a teaching on the nature and origin of civil power as to invite the christians to be submissive to such power, perhaps to accentuate the difference from the Jews.

The apologists such as Theophilus and Tertullian confirm, with different nuances, the loyalty of the christians towards the Empire. Theophilus⁵⁶ emphasizes that the king deserves honor and not adoration. Tertullian⁵⁷ affirms that the king is second to God and is inferior only to God.

With Irenaeus, under the drive of the demand for disproving the gnostic position, the interpretation is all the more pronounced; the origin of power is not diabolic, as what the gnostics affirm, but comes from God, even if it is closely connected to sin.⁵⁸ Irenaeus writes: "When man goes away from God, he becomes like a wild beast, treating his own relatives as enemies; he spends his time without fear in all restlessness, in murder, and in eagerness. God puts in him the fear of men (since they know not the fear of God), that being subject to man's power, and bound by their law, they might attain some degree of justice, and mutual moderation, fearing the visible sword; as was said by the Apostle: "The bearing of the sword has its significance. The authorities are there to serve God; they carry out God's revenge by punishing wrongdoers. (*Rom.* 13, 4) It is for the benefit, then, of the Gentiles that earthly authority is established by God." (*Adv. haer.* V 24, 1-3).⁵⁹

Even this reference to the pagans, and therefore to the sinners, show how for Irenaeus, civil authority should be connected with a sinful situation of humanity.

A further deepening is found in the commentary of Origen to *Rom.* 13:1-4.⁶⁰ He gets a question from the christians. How can an authority come from God if it persecutes them? The answer indicates the beginning of that distinction between the origin and

⁵⁶ Theophil., *Ad Autol.* i, 11.

⁵⁷ Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* II, 7.

⁵⁸ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* V, 24, 1-3.

⁵⁹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* V, 24, 2.

⁶⁰ Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* IX, 26-29.

the use of authority to which the writings of the fourth century go back many times. For Origen the authority conceded to the civil power is similar to the faculties which man enjoys: the origin is from God, the concrete use of it is from man. The Fathers of the Church who will comment on the text of Paul when the emperor becomes a christian, will further enrich the reflection of Irenaeus and Origen.

The Ambrosiaster, the first western commentator of *Rom.* 13, of the IV century, goes back to the topic concerning the divine origin of authority and the situation of sin in the world, to make the *princeps a minister poenarum*.⁶¹ Such *princeps* is also called *imago Dei*. For the author this title springs from the text of Paul, which he comments thus: "St. Paul calls *princeps* those governing people, whose task is to reform the life of men and to impede the contrary forces; and they are images of God, so that all are subjected to only one".⁶² But precisely the use of the title *imago Dei* for the emperor, gave rise to questions which the Ambrosiaster puts to himself and which he replies. Should it not be said that every man is an *imago Dei*? How then could one image command the other images? In this response he agreed that in fact it was not natural that man should be subjected to another man, but he suggested that it could be natural that the human government be an image of the divine monarchy. Thus, of the king could be said that he "bears the image of God as the bishop bears that of Christ".⁶³ The singularity of the thought of the Ambrosiaster appears evident when it is recalled that the expression *imago Dei* for Tertullian, Clement and Origen simply indicates the christian. Ambrose applies it also to Christ.⁶⁴

Ambrose takes the verses of *Romans* 13:1-4 again when he comments on one of the temptations undergone by Christ in the desert, according to the narration of *Luke* 4:5-6". Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, "I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, for it has been committed to me and I give to anyone I choose." To explain where

⁶¹ Ambrosiaster, *Comm. in Rom.* 13, 1-7.

⁶² Ambrosiaster, *Comm. in Rom.* 13, 3.

⁶³ Ambrosiaster, *Quaest. Vet. et Novi Testam.* 35.

⁶⁴ St. Ambrose, *Exp. evang. sec. Lucam* IX, 34-36.

the contradiction lies between the divine origin of authority affirmed in *Rom.* 13:1 and the power which the devil exercises over such authority, according to Luke 4:5-6, the bishop of Milan shows how, in practice, every human power dies by succumbing to ambition and to evil. He therefore affirms that the institution of authority comes from God but not its bestowal nor its use.

It is in the bestowal and in the use that the powers of evil and personal ambition can interfere. That is why Ambrose specifies that only the one, who uses power well, is *Dei minister*.⁶⁵ He shifts every valuation related to the principle of authority. It is still timely to observe that Ambrose, even with concrete adaptations due to the western situation, to its temperament and to its Roman culture, proposes again the idea of the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil and Gregory of Nazianzen. Basil affirms the legitimate institution of authority, but makes its juridical value depend on justice with which it operates;⁶⁶ Gregory of Nazianzen proclaims the superiority of the church over the state, in virtue of the parallelism: soul/body, church/empire.⁶⁷

Like Ambrose, even Chrysostom does not propose so literal an interpretation of the Pauline passage as to be able to think that God intervenes in the bestowal of authority among various people in the government. For Chrysostom it is order itself in which the whole universe — from macrocosm to microcosm — is established, and lives by the will of God to demand the existence of authority: that is, he who commands and consequently, he who obeys. Therefore as order which governs the universe is according to the will of God, so also the authority considered in itself, through which such order can sustain, is from God. To obey the authority is nothing else therefore than to obey God.⁶⁸

Pelagius, instead, in his commentary, brings forward a double interpretation: the "superior authorities", of which Paul speaks, can be understood as a civil authority or as a religious authority. In both cases, such authorities have received the *potestas* from God, but Pelagius clarifies that it does not mean that even the way of exercising power was of divine origin. This depends only on

⁶⁵ St. Ambrose, *Exp. evang. sec. Lucam* 4, 29-30.

⁶⁶ St. Basil, *Hom. in Prov.* 2.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orat.* 17 *Ep.* 152 & 153.

⁶⁸ St. J. Chrysostom, *Hom. XXIII-Comm. in Rom.* 13, 1-10.

man who can execute it in the sense willed by God or prevaricate it.⁶⁹ Furthermore Pelagius observes that he who behaves well has nothing to fear since whoever is killed by an unjust authority would be glorified. "The same condemnation for the wicked and praise for the good".⁷⁰

In conclusion, I would like to recall what I have said in the beginning about the importance of the *Letter to the Romans* and its commentaries. An importance which we have discovered in the history of the first five centuries but an importance which had not diminished in the succeeding centuries. The reason for such significance is proper to the message of the *Letter* which makes the project of God the Father known to men; which is realized *in* and *through* Christ, and which is taught daily by the spirit in the hearts of the believers; therefore the unity of all men and the unity of the whole history of mankind.

MARIA GRACIA MARA

⁶⁹ Pelagius, *Comm. in Rom.* 13, 1-2.

⁷⁰ Pelagius, *Comm. in Rom.* 13, 3.