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XXIII.28 How depopulation can be remedied

- The Spirit of Law - Book XXIII. On laws in their relation to the number of inhabitants -

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XXIII.28 How depopulation can be remedied

When a state finds itself depopulated because of particular accidents, wars, plagues, and famines, there are resources. The men who remain can preserve the spirit of work and industry ; they can seek to repair their misfortunes and become more industrious through the calamity itself. The almost incurable damage is when the depopulation has been long developing through an inner vice and bad government. Men have perished from an imperceptible, endemic disease : born into languor and misery, into violence or the government's prejudices, they have seen themselves destroyed, often without perceiving the causes of their destruction. Countries desolated by despotism, or by the excessive advantages of the clergy over the laity, are two prominent examples of this.

To restore a state so depopulated, one would wait in vain for help from the children who might be born. There is no more time ; men in their wilderness are without courage or initiative. With lands to feed a population, there is scarce enough food for a family. The populace in these countries have not even a share in their misery, in other words, in the fallow lands that fill them. The clergy, the prince, the cities, the grandees, and some of the principal citizens have gradually become the owners of the entire region ; it is uncultivated, but the destroyed families have left them the pasture lands, and the worker has nothing.

In this situation, we would have to do through the whole length of the empire what the Romans did in part of theirs, to practice, in the dearth of inhabitants, what they observed in their abundance : to distribute lands to all the families that have nothing, and procure for them the means of clearing and cultivating them. This distribution should be done whenever there is a man to receive it, so there would be not a moment lost for work.