

Christian Culture Lesson 3 The Patristic Age (300- 600 AD)

1. Constantine

It was with the Roman Emperor Constantine that the persecutions finally came to an end. In the year **312**, Constantine was preparing to do battle with his enemy Maxentius. In one account of the event, the Emperor dreamt of being ordered to put a "heavenly divine symbol" on the shields of his soldiers. This symbol was the **Chi Rho**, formed by superimposing the first two letters of the Greek word Christos (ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ) with the vertical stroke of the P (the Greek letter Rho) intersects the center of the X (the Greek letter Chi). In a different, later account, Constantine (and in fact the whole army) saw a cross of light imposed over the sun with the saying '*In this sign you will conquer!*'. That night, Christ appeared to the Roman emperor in a dream and told him to make a replica of the sign he had seen in the sky, which would be a sure defence in battle. Whichever version of the story is correct, we know that Constantine did indeed have this sign put onto his soldiers' shields and that he did defeat Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

Shortly afterwards, in **313**, Constantine issued a proclamation called **the Edict of Milan**, which declared religious tolerance for Christianity in the Roman empire. He began a major building programme, commissioning churches to be built in Rome to commemorate the martyrs St Peter and Paul, and at the site of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem. He also built a new imperial residence at Byzantium (currently Istanbul) and renamed the city Constantinople after himself. Constantinople became the capital of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire for more than a thousand years (the capital of the West was of course Rome, though as the barbarians hordes drew nearer, it was moved from Rome to Milan, and finally to **Ravenna** in 402).

Although Christianity would not become the official religion of Rome until the end of the fourth century, Constantine's imperial sanction of Christianity transformed its status and nature. Neither imperial Rome or Christianity would be the same after this moment. Rome would become Christian, and Christianity would take on the aura of imperial Rome.

2. The Christian Roman Empire: war inside and out

With one exception, all the Emperors from Constantine onwards tolerated and embraced Christianity (the one who did not was named 'Julian the Apostate - an apostate being someone who has rejected his religion; Julian tried to restore paganism to the Empire but failed). However, this was not a time of peace, either in the world or in the Church.

In the world, the borders of the Roman Empire had long been threatened and attacked by various groups of barbarians (notably the Goths). In **410**, Rome was sacked by **Alaric the Goth**; finally, in **476 AD**, the last Emperor of the West, Romulus Augustus, was deposed by the barbarian leader, **Odoacer**, who set himself up in Ravenna as 'King of Italy'. The Western Empire was replaced by a series of small kingdoms which were constantly at war with one another. The Eastern Empire continued to exist until it fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Christian art from the Eastern Empire is known as **Byzantine art**, after Byzantium.

Inside the Church, another kind of attack threatened Christian unity - an attack on the Divinity of Christ. The Church had, from the time of the apostles, taught that Christ is God. However, as theologians began to try to work this out in more detail, errors arose. The most dangerous error came from a priest called **Arius** who taught that God the Son had not, like God the Father, always existed, but instead had been created. When called on by his bishop to retract his heretical and blasphemous ideas, Arius refused and was excommunicated. Undeterred, he busied himself trying to win over other priests and bishops to his side. The Emperor Constantine, alarmed at the growing division in the Church, summoned all the bishops of the world to a general council in the year **325 AD**. This turned out to be one of the most important councils in history and is known as the **Council of Nicaea** (after the town in which it was held). Constantine, who was present at all the meetings, opened the proceedings with the following words: *'I consider dissension in the Church more dreadful and more painful than any other war'*. The Council declared unequivocally the un-createdness of the Son (and gave us the Nicene Creed we profess at every Sunday Mass), and Arius and his followers were exiled. However, the crisis was far from over and the influence of **Arianism** continued to spread. On his deathbed, Constantine was baptised by an Arian bishop. Odoacer, who deposed the last Roman Emperor in 476AD was also Arian. In fact, almost all the Goths and other tribes (e.g. Visigoths and Vandals), who took over after the fall of the Western Empire were Arian. They had been converted largely by one man, an Arian Bishop called **Ulfilas**, the son of Arian Christian parents who had been enslaved by the Goths. Ulfilas is credited with creating the first translation of the Bible into the Gothic language.

Saints who fought Arianism in the West...

The champion of orthodoxy in all this was **Saint Athanasius**, bishop of Alexandria. Despite threats, false accusations, banishment and excommunication, Athanasius never wavered in his determination to root out Arianism and restore the true faith. When the Arian Constantius, a son of Constantine, came to power, the Pope was exiled and an Arian anti-pope put in his place. When threatened by the Emperor with imprisonment or exile, virtually every bishop, including the Bishop of Rome, signed an Arian version of the creed. However, most of these bishops, once back safely in their sees, retracted their agreement, and soon, under the Catholic emperor Valentinian and his son, the faith began to be restored in the West. The trouble was not over, however. Within a year of Athanasius' death, **Saint Ambrose** became Bishop of Milan and continued the battle against Arianism, famously refusing to hand over one of Milan's churches to Valentinian's Arian wife, the Empress Justina. Ambrose, one of the most learned men of his age, famously taught his congregation to sing antiphonally and composed hymns which we still sing today. One person who heard the music in Ambrose's cathedral and was moved to tears by its beauty was **Saint Augustine**, who is regarded as the greatest saint of the patristic age. Augustine, who was baptised by Ambrose in 387AD also opposed Arianism, though he is more famous for fighting two other heretical groups: the **Donatists**, who claimed that people who committed mortal sin could not return to the Church even if they repented, and the **Pelagians** (followers of a British monk called Pelagius), who claimed that man could attain heaven without the help of God's grace. Augustine's writings against these heresies are some of the most important works in the history of the Church. In 410AD, when Alaric sacked Rome and the

pagan's blamed Christianity, Augustine wrote *'The City of God'*, the most famous defence of the Church against paganism, and one of the best explanations of the Catholic faith ever written. Augustine died just as the Arian Vandals were sacking his home town of Hippo in North Africa.

...and in the East

While Valentinian was trying to re-Catholicise the West, his brother Valens, who ruled the Eastern empire, was rabidly Arian. When Valens sent his prefect to threaten the holy, learned and Catholic bishop of Caesarea, **Saint Basil**, if he would not convert to Arianism, the prefect reported back that nothing in the world would make Basil convert (in fact, he was so impressed by Basil that he became his friend!). Another great Saint, **Gregory of Nazianzus**, became Bishop of the thoroughly Arian city of Constantinople, the residence of Emperor Valens himself. He began to preach daily on the true doctrine of the Trinity and within two years, despite fierce opposition, he had returned the city to the Catholic faith. **Saint Jerome**, who is famous for translating the whole of Scripture into Latin for the first time, travelled to Constantinople just to hear Gregory preach.

Finally, in the year 380, the Catholic Emperor Theodosius issued an Edict condemning all who maintained the Arian creed; in 381 he convened the **Council of Constantinople** which reaffirmed the Nicene Creed (and added the article about the Holy Ghost, whose Divinity some Arians had also challenged). For a while, in both East and West, Arianism declined, though it lingered for another three hundred years amongst some of the Gothic tribes.

3. The rise of monasticism

It was at this time that the first monasteries were built for Christians who wished to live a more secluded life. The first monastery was established by **Saint Pachomius** in Egypt in the year 318; the monks' days were highly regulated with prayer, work and meals in common. When the saint died in 346AD, there were already several thousand monks following his rule, and his sister had founded similar monasteries for women. By the end of the 4th century, the monastic ideal had spread to Asia, Arabia, and Europe. Saints Basil and Gregory Nazianzus promoted it and St Athanasius brought it to Rome. It was **Saint Martin** (better known as the Bishop of Tours who gave half his cloak to a beggar), who established monasticism in Gaul (modern day France). Another type of monastic life, that of the hermit who lived alone rather than in community, was typified by **St. Anthony**. He lived quite alone in the deserts of Egypt until his retreat was discovered, whence he retired to the mountains by the Red Sea, where he died in 356 at the age of 105. **Saint Patrick**, during his work of converting the pagan Irish to Christianity in the mid-400's, also established several monasteries which served as mission stations, and provided pastors for the new communities of Christian converts until native Irish could be trained for the priesthood. It has been written of St Patrick that *'he won such multitudes for Christ, he founded so many churches, ordained so many priests and bishops, and inflamed the hearts of so many converts'* that the flourishing of the Irish Church over the next three centuries was largely due to his apostolate. Early monasticism reached its height with **Saint Benedict** who founded the great abbey of **Monte Casino in 530 AD**.