

CHURCH HISTORY Part 1

Chapters 1-7

(c. 33- 843)

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CHURCH HISTORY 1

THE ORIGINS OF THE CHURCH AND ITS GROWTH DURING THE TIME OF THE APOSTLES

The second chapter of the *Act of the Apostles* dramatically describes the birth of the Christian Church at the Feast of Pentecost. During His life on earth, Our Blessed Lord had worked tirelessly to prepare His Apostles for the day when He would no longer be physically present with them. He had commanded them to make disciples of all nations, promising them, *“I am with you always, to the close of the age”* (Matt 28:20). He had prayed ceaselessly for them, asking that they might ever be one as He and His Father are one (Jn 17:21). He had commissioned St Peter to be the chief of the Apostles and to rule over the Church against which the gates of Hell should never prevail (Matt 16:18), and after His Resurrection had told him to *“Feed my sheep”* (Jn 21:18). He had promised the Apostles that He would send the Holy Ghost to them to *“guide you into all the truth”* (Jn 16:13). Now at Pentecost, as the Apostles sat together in the upper room with Mary, the mother of Jesus, all of those promises were fulfilled.

“Suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak in other tongues as the Holy Ghost gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:2-4).

St Luke (the author of *Acts* as well as the Gospel which bears his name) tells us that Jerusalem at the time was filled with Jews from *“every nation under Heaven”*. Although all the descendants of Abraham had originally lived in Palestine, the promised land given to Abraham by God, the Jewish people had twice been exiled from their homeland, once in the eighth century B.C. (the Assyrian exile) and again in sixth century B.C. (the Babylonian exile). As a result of this, as well as later emigration caused by the poor economy of Palestine, Jewish people by the time of Our Lord lived throughout the entire Roman Empire and beyond. There were twelve synagogues in Rome alone, whilst Egypt was home to the largest number of Jews in the entire Empire. Many Jews would return to Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman world to celebrate the great Festivals; hence, when St Peter, newly filled with the Holy Ghost, began to preach about the Risen Lord he found a ready audience of men and women astonished to hear him preaching in their own diverse languages.

We know from *Acts* that about 3,000 Jews were converted to Christianity on the Feast of Pentecost, to which many more were added in the days ahead. In quite a short time there were many Christians in both Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. As the Church then began to spread beyond this area to the Syrian cities of Damascus and Antioch it was again, at first, in the Jewish communities that it took root. This is quite easy to understand when one thinks that it was to the Jewish people that God had first revealed Himself. It was they whom He called into a covenant, first that with Abraham symbolised in the rite of circumcision, and

secondly that with Moses to whom He gave the Law on Mount Sinai. To them He had also spoken through the prophets who had instilled into them many of the ideas which Christianity now also proclaimed, such as the election of God's people, the importance of not participating in pagan cults and the need for qualities such as charity and mercy. Above all Judaism, like Christianity, was dedicated to the worship of the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was therefore a fertile soil into which the Church could be planted.

However, although many Jews accepted that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah and converted to Christianity, a far larger number rejected Him as a false prophet. It was, after all, the Temple authorities and the leaders of the Jewish people who had pushed Pontius Pilate into having Him crucified and it was difficult for the religious leaders in particular to admit their mistake. As a result, a fierce persecution of Christianity by the Jewish authorities began to take place. On one occasion St Peter and St John were arrested after they had miraculously healed a man who had been lame from birth at the gate of the Temple and begun preaching about Jesus' resurrection. They were thrown into prison and ordered not to speak again about Jesus. Both refused, saying that they must obey God before men. The authorities were so afraid of Peter and John's popularity with the people following the healing miracle that they released them.

Soon after this, however, St Stephen was killed for his faith, becoming the first Christian martyr. Stephen had been appointed by the Apostles to serve as one of seven deacons. He was a man of exceptional gifts, *"full of faith and the Holy Ghost"*. A public disputation was held in Jerusalem where Stephen eloquently defended the Church's teachings about Jesus. His Jewish opponents had him seized and brought before the council where he was accused of blasphemy, *"against Moses and against God"*. At the council meeting he spoke of seeing the heavens opened and *"the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"*. This so infuriated them that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. As he died St Stephen prayed for his persecutors as Our Lord had done on the cross and as countless Christian martyrs were to do down the centuries.

One man was involved in Stephen's stoning who was to become one of the greatest persecutors of the Church but later one of its greatest evangelists. He was Saul of Tarsus, a man trained as a Pharisee in one of the leading schools. Like many Pharisees he regarded the Christians as blasphemers against God. He stood by and watched as Stephen was killed. Immediately afterwards he oversaw a great persecution of the Church in Jerusalem, going from house to house and arresting many Christians. After this he set out for Damascus intending to arrest Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. As he was travelling there occurred perhaps the most important miracle in the life of the early Church, one which would completely change forever the direction which the Church would take. Paul was suddenly blinded by a great light from Heaven. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me. I am Jesus whom you*

are persecuting". This vision resulted in Saul's conversion to Christianity. He went on to Damascus where, after three days, his sight was restored to him, and he was baptised. He then began to proclaim Christ in Damascus before returning to Jerusalem.

Until this point, all Christian converts came from the Jewish faith. However, shortly after Paul's conversion a Gentile, the Roman centurion Cornelius, sought to become a Christian and called St Peter to his home in Caesarea. While he was at Joppe, Peter had already received a vision from God in which foods regarded by the Jews as unclean had now been cleansed by God. He understood from this that Gentiles, with whom pious Jews would not normally share table fellowship, could also be received into the Church. While he was talking to Cornelius the Holy Ghost fell on Cornelius and all his companions to the astonishment of Peter's Jewish Christian friends. Peter then baptised Cornelius and his companions. Once the news reached Jerusalem, the Christians there (all of whom, of course, were Jewish) raised strong objections, particularly to Peter's eating with Gentile converts, but Peter told them of his vision and was able to convince them that "*to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life*" (Acts 11:18).

Although St Peter had been the first to bring Gentiles into the Church, it was St Paul who was to become the greatest Apostle to the Gentiles. In three great missionary journeys St Paul took the gospel to many peoples of the Mediterranean world. The first journey took Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, from Antioch, where many more Gentiles had already joined the Church, to Cyprus. At Paphos, the main city of the island, they converted the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus. They were able to achieve this by engaging in a spiritual battle against a magician called Elymas. When Elymas tried to win the proconsul away from them Paul stood up to him and Elymas was struck blind by God. Paul and Barnabas then sailed on to Perga, Iconium and Lystra before returning to Antioch in Syria.

The Acts of the Apostles shows us that Paul always began his preaching in the synagogues where he was able to convert many more Jews and God-fearers, but as more and more Jews rejected his teachings he turned increasingly to the Gentiles. Their encounter with pagans often led to some bizarre incidents such as in Lystra when Paul healed a cripple. Some of the local pagans at once thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods and hailed Barnabas as Zeus and Paul, because he spoke most, as Hermes (the messenger of the Greek gods). Paul had to rebuke them saying that he and Barnabas were mere men and was only just able to prevent the pagans from making sacrifices to them.

The influx of Gentiles into the previously Jewish Church led to a crisis on Paul's return to Antioch. Some of those who believed strongly that Christians must still follow the Law of Moses and be circumcised objected to Paul's conversion of Gentiles without circumcising them first. The crisis was dealt with by a great meeting of the Church at Jerusalem where there was a great discussion between the two parties.

Some Pharisees who had become Christians argued that circumcision and the keeping of the Law of Moses was necessary for salvation. However, Peter again recounted the story of the falling of the Holy Ghost on the Gentiles at Caesarea as proof that God had accepted the Gentiles for salvation. Led by James, who was bishop of Jerusalem, the council agreed that circumcision should not be imposed upon Gentile converts who would be asked only to abstain from meat sacrificed to pagan gods, from blood and from unchastity.

From this time onwards the Church was fully open to both Jewish and Gentile converts, and it became much easier to convert Gentiles since they were not required to keep the very onerous provisions of the Jewish Law. Inevitably, in quite a short time, the number of Gentile Christians came to outnumber that of Jewish Christians. Other events were to speed up the process whereby the Church grew apart from its Jewish roots. Despite the Jewish persecution of Christians, the early Jewish Christians continued to worship in the Temple and in the synagogue as well as with their fellow Christians in private houses where the Eucharist would be celebrated. However, in 66 A.D. there was a large-scale Jewish revolt against Roman occupation which led to many Christians leaving the city. Rome sent her greatest general, Vespasian, with 60,000 soldiers to put down the revolt. After 3 years of fighting, he had conquered the whole country apart from Jerusalem to which he was about to lay siege when he was proclaimed Emperor and left his son, Titus, to carry on the siege. After a long siege, in 70 A.D. the Romans took the city which was completely destroyed along with the Temple. This brought to an end the traditional Jewish sacrifices, and this was seen by many Christians as God's punishment for the rejection of Christ. Finally in 85 A.D. the Jewish authorities inserted into the synagogue liturgy a condemnation of Christians which read "May the Nazarenes and the heretics be suddenly destroyed and removed from the Book of Life". This made it impossible for Jewish Christians to worship in the synagogue and led to the final estrangement of the two religions.

In the meantime, Paul's further missionary journeys had continued to bring about a huge growth in the Church. Between 43 A.D. (when Herod persecuted the Church in Jerusalem, killing St James the brother of St John and imprisoning others) and 64 A.D. the Church enjoyed relative peace and freedom from persecution. This contributed to the growth of the numbers of the faithful in this period. In 50 A.D. Paul and Silas set out from Antioch on the second great missionary journey which took them to many parts of Asia Minor and then to Athens and Corinth. This was the first time that Christianity had been preached outside Palestine and Asia Minor and the first European convert was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira who was baptised with her entire household. After this Paul moved around various Greek cities establishing churches in many of them, including Corinth and Thessalonica to which he later wrote some of his great epistles.

53 to 57 A.D. saw Paul's third journey around Asia Minor and Greece ending back at Jerusalem. While he was in Ephesus a great riot broke out against him and his

companions. God had worked so many miracles through Paul and he had preached so eloquently that many pagans had been converted to Christianity. This had led to a massive fall off in the number of people going to the temple of Artemis of the Ephesians causing the silversmiths to fear for their trade since there was now less and less demand for silver statues of the goddess. Paul had convinced them that “gods made with hands are not gods” (Acts 19:26). One of the silversmiths, Demetrius, worked his fellow craftsmen into a frenzy and a riot broke out which was only narrowly quelled.

At the end of his third missionary journey Paul returned to Jerusalem. There the Jews plotted to kill him and 40 of them took a vow not to eat or drink until he was dead. The Roman tribune had him secretly escorted to Caesarea where, before Festus the governor, he declared himself a Roman citizen and appealed, as was his right as a citizen, to the Emperor. This led to Paul’s being handed over to a centurion called Julius who escorted him by ship as a prisoner to Rome, the last of his journeys reported in Acts. The journey was long and arduous, involving violent storms around Crete and a shipwreck off the coast of Malta, but eventually Paul came to Rome where he was held under house arrest for two years. St Luke tells us that Christians in Rome heard that Paul and his guards were approaching on the Via Appia and some of them went out to meet him. There is a lovely passage in Acts where St Luke describes the scene. Paul, tired and dejected after his long journey, sees his Christian brothers and sisters approaching and “thanked God and took courage” (Acts 27:16).

After two years of relatively loose confinement under military guard in Rome, during which time he wrote his epistles to the Ephesians, the Colossians, Philemon and the Philippians, Paul was finally brought to trial and acquitted. He was then free to travel yet again and, although Acts does not cover this later period, there is evidence that he visited Spain and then probably returned once more to Asia Minor. The Roman Church which welcomed St Paul in 60 A.D. was already well established. We know that by 50 A.D. Christianity had become strong enough in Rome to earn the antagonism of the Jews, who existed in large numbers in the imperial city. We know that in that year the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome and this expulsion obviously included Jewish Christians among whom were Aquila and his wife, Prisca, who are said in Acts to have moved to Corinth because of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. They welcomed St Paul to their house there when he visited Corinth in 51 A.D. and he lived with them for the whole of his 18 month stay in the city. In 57 A.D. St Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans in which he expressed his longing to visit the Church there.

Tradition tells us that it was St Peter who founded the Church in Rome and presided over it for 25 years. Since his martyrdom occurred almost certainly in 67 A.D. this would put the foundation of the Church of Rome at 42 A.D. It was the twin facts of Peter’s foundation of the Church in Rome and of the dual martyrdom there of both St Peter and St Paul that gave to that Church from the very first a pre-eminence over every other Church in Christendom.

CHURCH HISTORY 2

THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

In the first 30 years of its existence the Christian Church had not suffered persecution from the Roman Empire. The examples of persecution given in the Act of the Apostles during this period are all at the hands of the Jews. St Stephen was stoned to death by the Jews following his trial before the Sanhedrin. St James, the brother of St John, was beheaded by King Herod in 44 A.D. who then, when he saw “that it pleased the Jews” (Acts 12:3) went on to arrest St Peter. In 62 A.D. St James the Less was stoned to death at the instigation of the Jewish High Priest, Ananias. In Chapter 23 of Acts St Paul is arrested by the Jews, a group of whom plot to kill him. The Roman authorities during this period are either not involved or even seek to keep the peace between the Christians and their Jewish opponents. This is because Christianity was seen as a sect within Judaism and Judaism was itself tolerated under Roman Law as a *religio licita* (“a legal religion”).

In 64 A.D. an event took place which brought a radical change to this with terrible consequences for the early Christians. A fire broke out in Rome in July which raged for 9 days by the end of which large parts of the city had been destroyed. The Roman historian, Tacitus, writing in about 115 A.D. tells us that the people of the city blamed Nero for having deliberately started the fire so that he could replace the narrow streets and slums of the city with wider roads and new buildings. He goes on to say that Nero decided to lay the blame on the Christians in order to scotch this rumour. He writes:

“Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator, Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more not only in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself... First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night.”

Other Roman historians also wrote about the Neronian persecution. Suetonius says the Christians were executed because they were guilty of a “new and malevolent superstition”. This all suggests that people were ready to believe the Christians guilty of starting the fire because they were already thought of as guilty of many vices. It also looks as if Nero now set a precedent. If he had executed the Christians for arson alone that might have been just a one-off event, but if the very fact of being a

Christian made a person guilty of “illegal superstition” (*superstitio illicita*) they could be persecuted by the state at any time and in any place.

We should not, however, think of persecution as a constant state of affairs in the Roman Empire of the first three centuries. The early Church enjoyed many periods of peace during which she was able to consolidate and grow. Moreover, the persecutions of the first two centuries, when they did occur, were generally local affairs brought about either by the provocation of local pagans or by the zeal of particular governors. The only other persecution we are aware of in the first century was one which took place under Domitian in 95 A.D. This is important because it shows us that Christians were now in very high places. The emperor’s cousin, Flavius Clemens, had become consul in that year but he and his wife Domitilla were charged with atheism (*impietas*). Flavius Clemens was condemned to death and his wife exiled. Prominent Christians at this time would have tended to fight shy of public life in order not to have to take part in the imperial cult, but it is probable that Clemens could not avoid taking his turn as consul and this would have highlighted what Suetonius called his “*contemptissima inertia*”, that is his reluctance to take part in his public duties which would have included the duty to sacrifice to the emperor. Frequently Christians were accused by these pagan writers of atheism on account of their refusal to honour the ancient gods of Rome.

Increasingly it was this charge of atheism which was to become the basis for Christian persecution. The next time that we see this is under the emperor Trajan (98 – 117 A.D.). One of the greatest of the early martyrs was St Ignatius of Antioch. Unfortunately, we do not know the precise charge against him though it seems likely that it would have been that of atheism. St Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch perhaps from as early as 69 A.D. and had been arrested in 107 A.D. and sent to Rome for execution. As he travelled to the capital of the Empire, he wrote 7 remarkable letters making him the most important Christian writer since the Apostles. He is the first writer to use the term “the Catholic Church” and wrote a great deal about the importance of the bishop in each church. He was a heroic witness to the faith and looked forward to martyrdom which he knew would bring him eternal life. In his Epistle to the Romans he wrote:

“I look forward with joy to the wild animals held in readiness for me, and I pray that they may attack me... : I bid all men to know that of my own free will I die for God, unless ye should hinder me... Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain unto God. I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”

Soon after his arrival in Rome St Ignatius won the crown of martyrdom for which he had longed. Tradition holds that he met his death in the Flavian amphitheatre and that his disciples then gathered up his bones and took them back to Antioch.

As well as the precious letters of St Ignatius there also survives from this time the correspondence of 112 A.D. between the Governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, and the Emperor Trajan. These documents are amongst the most important surviving records from this time and tell us a great deal about both the reasons why Christians were martyred and the methods used. Pliny's letter makes it clear that trials of Christians had been going on for quite some time, since he says that he himself has not been present at any of them, and he is now writing to the emperor to ask for his guidance. He asks a number of questions: should the old, children and the infirm also be executed if they are found guilty of being Christians, should a Christian be spared if he recants and should a Christian be punished purely for being a Christian or only if he was guilty of the other crimes associated with Christianity. He goes on to tell the emperor what his practice has been:

“This is the plan which I have adopted in the case of Christians who have been brought before me. I ask them whether they are Christians: if they say “Yes” then I repeat the question a second time and also a third – warning them of the death penalty involved: and if they persist, I order them to be executed.”

He tells us that many recanted and demonstrated that they were no longer Christians by burning incense before the image of the emperor and cursing the name of Christ, and that such people were released and not executed. However, Pliny's letter also makes it clear that he knew that Christians were not guilty of any crimes other than that of being Christians, because he tells us that he had tortured two deaconesses and their confessions showed that they were not guilty of anything except their superstitious beliefs. Finally, the letter also shows that Christians were frequently denounced by their neighbours who often brought anonymous accusations against them.

One of the greatest of the early martyrs was Saint Polycarp and we are fortunate to have a surviving account of his death in 155 A.D. in a letter written by the church of Smyrna (of which he was the bishop) to that of Philomelium. St Polycarp is a fascinating figure, not least because he forms a link between the church of the mid-second century and Our Lord Himself. We know from the writings of St Irenaeus, who had been taught by St Polycarp as a boy, that the latter had himself been a disciple of St John the Apostle. A Roman presbyter called Florinus, who had also been taught by St Polycarp, had lapsed into heresy and St Irenaeus wrote a letter admonishing him for his heresies in which he said:

“I saw thee when I was still a boy in lower Asia in company with Polycarp... For I distinctly remember the incidents of that time better than events of recent occurrence... I can describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp used to sit when he discoursed... his personal appearance... and how he would describe his intercourse with John and with the rest who had seen the Lord, and how he would relate their words...”

In another letter, St Irenaeus tells us that St Polycarp was appointed bishop of Smyrna by the Apostles themselves.

The letter describing St Polycarp's martyrdom tells us that a great persecution had arisen in Smyrna. Following the brave death of one Germanicus, the pagan crowd was enraged, and cries went up of "Away with the atheists; let search be made for Polycarp". Polycarp was arrested and taken to the stadium where a great crowd was gathered. We are told that as he entered the stadium the Christians who were present heard a voice from Heaven, saying "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." The proconsul, Statius Quadratus, urged Polycarp to curse Christ, but he repeatedly refused and so was condemned to be burned alive. We are told that while he was being questioned "he was overflowing with courage and joy, and his whole countenance was beaming with grace". The fire, "like the sail of a vessel filled by the wind, made a wall around the body,, and we became aware of a delicious fragrance, like the odour of incense or other precious gums". One of the soldiers stabbed St Polycarp with a sword to end his life and his body was then left to be burned but the Christians took up his charred bones and preserved them as precious relics placing them in a suitable place where "we will celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in joy and gladness".

In 161 Marcus Aurelius became emperor and under his rule there was an intensification of persecution. The most illustrious of the martyrs of this period was St Justin Martyr. Born around 100 A.D. in Flavia Neapolis in Syria, Justin was trained as a philosopher, and was converted to Christianity at the age of about 30. He wrote several apologies defending the Christian faith against both Jewish and pagan objections. Eventually he settled in Rome where he opened a school of Christian philosophy. In about 165 he and six companions were condemned to death for refusing to sacrifice to the gods. When threatened with death at his trial he said "It is our hearts' desire to be martyred for Our Lord Jesus Christ and then be happy forever".

In 177 A.D. the populace of Lyons in Gaul began to act against the Christians there, driving them from the public buildings and accosting them in the street. Eventually the governor took up the cause and began to arrest Christians and examine them. Whenever a Christian admitted his or her faith he was subjected to terrible tortures and condemned to cruel death. Six were devoured by wild beasts in the amphitheatre and in total 50 suffered martyrdom, including the 90 year old bishop, St Pothinus, and the incredibly brave slave girl, St Blandina, whose death is described in a letter from the Church of Lyons where we are told that she died "like one bidden to a marriage supper, rather than cast to wild beasts".

The Church in North Africa was very strong in its faith. It produced the great teacher and apologist Tertullian who famously said that "*semen est sanguis Christianorum*" (usually rendered as "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"). Unfortunately, later in life he fell under the spell of the rigorist sect called

Montanism, a group which we will study later when we look at early Christian heresies and died outside the Church. But the African church remained a great force and produced many martyrs. Of these two of the most heroic were Saints Felicity and Perpetua. Perpetua was a noble lady and Felicity her slave and companion. They were catechumens and were arrested in 203 A.D. along with four others. We have a contemporary record which gives us great details of their sufferings. It is an extraordinary document because a large part of it was written by St Perpetua herself from her prison cell. She describes the great fear that she felt on being put in prison because “because I had never before known such darkness” and tells of the enormous pressure which her pagan father put on her to give up her faith. She recounts that the catechumens were all baptised while in prison. Most movingly of all she tells us how her young baby, who had been entrusted to her parents when she was first imprisoned, was later brought to her in the prison where she nursed him. She says that now “my prison became my palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else”. All the prisoners refused to sacrifice to the gods or to the emperor and were condemned to be thrown to the wild animals. Felicity was pregnant at the time and feared that she would be spared martyrdom on account of her pregnancy. She was therefore very happy when she gave birth to the child two days before the executions were due and so was able to join her friends in suffering for Christ. The account tells us repeatedly of the joy and courage of the martyrs. When they leave their prison for the last time they march “joyously, as if going to heaven, their faces radiant” and Perpetua is described as having “a shining face...as a wife of Christ and darling of God”.

In the first half of the third century, Christians enjoyed a relatively calm period. In particular, the reign of Philip the Arab (244 to 249), who may even have himself been a Christian according to some sources, had been a time of toleration. In 248, the Christian teacher, Origen, noted that many pagans were unhappy with this situation, complaining that there were too many Christians and that “the government no longer persecutes them as in the past”. The empire was increasingly under threat from barbarians and many pagans blamed this on the waning of the worship of the ancient gods. In 249 Philip was defeated by Decius who became emperor and was hailed “*restitutor sacrorum*”. In 250 Decius issued an edict requiring everyone in the empire to present themselves before a commission and to make a sacrifice to the gods in order to receive a certificate (a *libellus*) as proof of having done so. Once again, the Christians in Africa bore the brunt of this persecution as the locals took advantage of the edict to organise riots against the Christians. Many suffered martyrdom during this period, among them Pope Fabian and the bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch and Toulouse and many also weakened and offered sacrifices causing much trouble for the church which had to deal with those who had committed apostasy and later wished to return to the church. In 251 Decius was killed in battle and his policy died with him.

Unfortunately, it did not take long for his son Valerian to implement an even more severe policy. Up until this time Christians had been punished as individuals for their

refusal to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Valerian decided that the time had come to enact laws against the Church itself as an institution. This was a time of great crisis in the empire. The Goths were defeating the Roman legions along the Danube whilst the Persians were threatening the empire from the east. It was also a time of famine and plague. By this stage Christians may have accounted for as many as one third of the entire population of the empire and this now included many in high places and even within circles close to the emperors. Many pagans now blamed the crisis on the fact that so many people had deserted the ancient gods. Under pressure from the people, Valerian issued an edict in 257 under which churches were to be closed, burial grounds confiscated, and bishops, priests and deacons executed or sent into exile. This was followed up with a further edict in 258 under which there was a purge of Christians in the senate, all of whom were to be put to death. It was during the persecution which followed this edict that St Cyprian of Carthage and St Sixtus of Rome and his deacon St Lawrence were martyred.

In 260 Valerian was killed in battle with the Persians and his son Gallienus reversed his policy, revoking the acts of confiscation and ordering local magistrates to return the churches and confiscated properties to their bishops. This edict meant that for the first time the Church as an institution was officially recognised by the state. It led to 40 years' peace for the Church.

However, there was to be yet one more great persecution before Christianity was to have lasting toleration in the Roman empire. In 285 Diocletian became emperor and soon afterwards he carried out a reorganisation of the entire empire, dividing it into 4 with two emperors in the east (himself and Galerian) and two in the west (Maximian and Constantius Chlorus). Together they formed what was called the tetrarchy. Both Diocletian and Constantius Chlorus favoured a policy of continued toleration towards Christians. However, their two deputies were tyrannical by nature and hated Christianity. Toleration first began to break down in the army when the *haruspices* declared that they could not read the entrails of the sacrificial animals because of the presence of Christian soldiers. This led to the expulsion of Christians from the army. Then, starting in 303, Galerian issued a series of edicts which ordered the confiscation and destruction of churches, and the burning of the Holy Scriptures, and forced all Christians to sacrifice to the gods on pain of death. The edicts were differently enforced by the four rulers. The longest and most severe persecution was in the east under Galerian where it lasted from 303 until 313. In the West Maximian enforced the edicts in Italy, Spain and Africa but only until 306 whereas Constantius took very little action in Gaul and Britain.

This was the worst of all the persecutions and claimed a large number of victims. Although some bishops and priests (known as the *traditores*) did hand over the scriptures, most resisted with the result that the prisons and the mines were filled to overflowing. In one district of Egypt we are told that 10 to 60 victims were put to death each day for over a year. The martyrs included SS Cosmas and Damian, Catherine, Lucy, Felix, Vincent and Agnes. Eusebius tells us of the martyrdom of

Paul of Gaza in Palestine. As he was to be executed, he asked permission to pray. When this was granted, he prayed for his fellow Christians that their trials might be shortened, for the conversion of Jews, Samaritans and pagans, for the judge who had condemned him to death, for his executioner and for the rulers of the empire. Eusebius says “What an infinite wealth of love lies in this prayer”.

From 306 Constantine, son of Constantius Chlorus, eliminated his rivals and in 312 he won his great victory at Milvian Bridge over Maxentius. Eusebius attributed this to God’s miraculous intervention telling us that Constantine saw a glowing cross in the sky before the battle bearing the words “In this sign you will conquer”. Persecution continued in the East for a while but in 313 Constantine and the eastern emperor, Licinius, agreed a policy of toleration and jointly issued the Edict of Milan declaring total freedom of worship for Christians throughout the Empire. The courage and love shown by the martyrs had finally brought about the triumph of the Church.

CHURCH HISTORY 3

EARLY HERESY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHURCH AUTHORITY

From the earliest days of Christianity some people began to teach doctrines which were false and tended to lead the faithful astray. We see this in St Paul's Epistles where he often had to correct the Christians of the churches which he had founded. In Corinth there was a group who thought of themselves as a spiritual elite who possessed greater wisdom than their fellow Christians. This group wanted to spiritualise the Gospel, so they denied the physical resurrection of the dead. St Paul responds to this with his great statement about the resurrection in the 15th Chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians. Again, in Colossae an even greater heresy had developed with Christians worshipping angelic powers. The word heresy (*haeresis* in Latin) means choice and has always been used by the Church to describe those who choose their own doctrines against those of the Church.

Both of these heresies show signs of an early form of Gnosticism. The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge (*gnosis*) and the greatest heresy which the early Church had to face was one based on the belief that certain Christians had a special knowledge revealed to them by God and hidden from normal Christians. Although this was a great threat to the truth of the Gospel, the process of opposing these errors helped the Church to establish three things which were vital to the preservation of the truth, and which were to become the bedrock of the Catholic Church. The first of these was the role of the bishop as the source of unity in each local church, the second the canon of scripture and the third the Rule of Faith which was effectively the origin of the Creeds. We will talk about each of these once we have understood better the heresies that the Church encountered.

It is estimated that between 80 A.D. and 150 A.D. at least 12 different kinds of Gnosticism sprung up within the Church. Each Gnostic group claimed their own specially revealed knowledge or *gnosis*, although each disagreed with the others about exactly what this was. It would generally involve some kind of myth about the origin of the world. Most Gnostics believed that amongst the human race there were some special people whom they called the elect, and that in the elect there was a divine spark or spirit which had become imprisoned inside physical matter. They are often called dualists because they believe in a dual creation, one of spirit and one of matter with these two being in opposition to one another. They thought that physical matter was evil and that the point of true Christianity was to free the spirit from the body so that it could travel back to God. They thought of this journey as being a complicated one through many levels of heavenly spheres. These spheres were each guarded by monstrous powers and the Gnostics spent a great deal of time learning secret passwords which would enable them after death to force the evil powers to let them through into the next level. Of course, each sect disagreed with the others about what these secret passwords were, and this was to be one of the weaknesses which the Church Fathers pointed out in their teachings.

Two of the best-known Gnostic sects were the Egyptian Gnostics founded by Basilides and the Roman Valentinians. They both accepted Jesus as the Redeemer but, because they thought physical matter evil, they rejected both the Incarnation and the Resurrection. They are known as Docetists (from the Greek word, *dokesis*, meaning semblance or appearance) because they thought that Christ's human body was only an illusion. They thought that, although Christ appeared in flesh and blood, those who had true knowledge (*gnosis*) would perceive Him to be pure spirit.

The other important feature of the Gnostics was that they usually dismissed the Old Testament and taught that the God of the Jews was not the Father of Jesus Christ but rather an evil god who had created the matter from which the Gnostic wanted to free himself. They believed in a great cosmic struggle between these two gods standing for the principles of good and evil. They thought that the god of the Old Testament was a god of wrath and that only with the coming of Christ was the true god revealed for the first time. The heretic Marcion was a strong exponent of this view, and he founded a sect in Rome whose followers came to be called Marcionites. He wrote a book called *Antitheses* in which he listed the contradictions which he believed existed between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He thought that the Old Testament God had created evil matter and allowed it to be perpetuated through sexual reproduction. As a result, he rejected marriage itself as evil as well as the Virgin Birth. Not only did he reject the Old Testament, but he accepted only one of the four Gospels (that of St Luke) and even that was edited to create what he believed was a pure text, purged of its Jewish elements.

After St Paul, the next Christian writer who opposed Gnosticism was St Ignatius of Antioch. Many of his letters attack the false teachings of the Docetic movements and insist on the hard physical reality of Christ's human body. He starts his letter to the Christians at Smyrna:

“Glory be to Jesus Christ, the Divine One, who has gifted you with such wisdom. I have seen how immovably settled in faith you are; nailed body and soul, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and rooted and grounded in love by His blood. You hold the firmest conviction about Our Lord; believing Him to be truly of David's line in His manhood, yet Son of God by the Divine will and power; truly born of a Virgin; baptised by John for His fulfilling of all righteousness; and in the days of Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch truly pierced by nails in His human flesh (a Fruit imparting life to us from His most blessed Passion) so that by His resurrection He might set up a beacon for all time to call together His saints and believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, in the one body of His Church.

All this He submitted to for our sakes, that salvation might be ours. And suffer He did, verily and indeed: just as He did verily and indeed raise Himself again. His Passion was no unreal illusion, as some sceptics aver who are all unreality themselves. The fate of those wretches will match their belief, for one day they will similarly become phantoms without substance themselves.

For my own part, I know and believe that He was in actual human flesh, even after His resurrection.”

Later on in the letter, he condemns those who *“will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Saviour Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins.”*

We spoke earlier of the three weapons which the Church used against the heretics. Because he was writing at such an early stage, St Ignatius had only one of those at his disposal – the bishop as the source of authority, truth and unity. He stresses this many times in his letters to the various churches. Later in the same letter to Smyrna he writes:

“Follow your bishop, everyone of you, as obediently as Jesus Christ followed the Father. ... Make sure that no step affecting the church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop’s sanction. The sole Eucharist you should consider valid is one that is celebrated by the bishop himself, or by some person authorised by him.”

St Ignatius tells us elsewhere that the importance of the bishop as guarantor of truth comes from the fact that bishops were appointed by the apostles to rule the local churches which they established. We can read an even earlier statement of this in St Clement of Rome’s letter to the Corinthians which may have been written as early as 70 A.D. and certainly by 90 A.D. He says:

“When the Apostles had been given their instructions, and all their doubts had been set at rest by the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, they set out in the full assurance of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom. And as they went through the territories and townships preaching, they appointed their first converts – after testing them by the Spirit – to be bishops and deacons for the believers of the future. ... and they went on to add an instruction that if these should fall asleep [i.e. die], other accredited persons should succeed them in their office.”

At this point (around 107 A.D.) there was no canon¹ of scripture accepted by the whole Church, but St Ignatius sets up the authority of the bishops throughout the Catholic Church as the guarantor of truth and unity against the many diverse heretical sects who all disagree with one another. Another Christian Father who was to stress the authority of the bishop against the Gnostics was St Irenaeus. Irenaeus is a very important second century saint and Father of the Church. We are not sure exactly when he was born but it was probably sometime between 115 and 125 A.D. He tells us that as a very young boy he had seen and heard St Polycarp who had made a great impression on him. He had travelled from his native Asia Minor to Lyons and was a priest of that Church when the persecution under Marcus Aurelius took place in 177 A.D. He was sent to Rome on a mission to Pope Eleutherius and on his return became bishop of Lyons in succession to Saint Pothinus who had suffered martyrdom. He wrote a large number of books in Greek of which two have survived in Latin versions. These are called *Adversus haereses* and *Proof of the Apostolic Teaching*. The full title of the first of these is *The Detection and Overthrow of the*

False Knowledge which, of course, refers to the false knowledge of Gnosticism. Like St Ignatius, St Irenaeus refutes the false claims of the Gnostics and goes into great detail to show where they are wrong. Like St Ignatius he makes the apostolic succession of the bishops a key point of his defence.

“The tradition of the apostles, manifested throughout the world, can be clearly seen in every church by those who wish to behold the truth. We can enumerate those who were established by the apostles as bishops in the churches, and their successors down to our time... But since it would be very long in such a volume as this to enumerate the successions of all the churches, I can by pointing out the tradition which that very great, oldest, and well-known church established at Rome by those two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul, received from the apostles, and its faith known among men, which comes down to us through the succession of bishops, put to shame all of those who in any way, either through wicked self-conceit, or through vainglory or through blind and evil opinion, gather as they should not. For every church must be in harmony with this church because of its outstanding pre-eminence...”

He goes on to list all the bishops of Rome from St Peter to his own day.

As well as the episcopal succession, St Irenaeus names the two other weapons which the Church has against the heretics: Holy Scripture and the Rule of Faith. In the first century Scripture had meant the Old Testament. The churches for which the Evangelists had written their Gospels and those to whom St Paul had written his epistles would no doubt have read them out at Mass, but it would have taken time for these documents to get into wider circulation. Gradually by the middle of the second century we find the Gospels and the Epistles being quoted by Church Fathers along with other writings such as the Epistle of St Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas, but they were still not accorded the status of Scripture along with the books of the Old Testament. By 200 A.D., however, there is evidence that the churches had formed what was called a canon of Scripture whereby those writings which were believed to have been written by the Apostles were given the same authority as those of the Old Testament. In particular St Irenaeus names the canonical books of the Christian scriptures in contrast to those of the heretics who, he tells us, rejected or edited many of these books and invented others including many false gospels such as the Gospel of Thomas. In 1945 an Egyptian shepherd boy discovered 13 leather bound papyrus codices buried in a sealed jar. They contained many of the writings of the Gnostics, including a complete edition of the Gospel of Thomas, confirming many of the doctrines which Irenaeus had ascribed to them.

The Rule of Faith, as St Irenaeus understood it, was essentially an early creed. It would have been based on the creed recited by the catechumens at their baptism. St Irenaeus states that the whole Church believes:

“in one God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth and the seas and all that is therein, and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit who through the prophets preached the dispensations and the comings and the Virgin Birth and the passion, and the rising from the dead and the assumption into Heaven in his flesh of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, and his coming from Heaven in the glory of the Father... to raise up all flesh”.

In addition to Gnosticism, the early Church also had to combat another significant heresy, that of Montanism. It began sometime before 170 A.D. when a Phrygian named Montanus along with two women, Prisca and Maximilla, started to deliver ecstatic utterances. The Montanists believed that these were oracles directly given by the Holy Ghost with the same authority as scripture and demanded that the whole Church should accept them. The movement spread very rapidly taking hold particularly in those churches which had suffered persecution to whom its strict and ascetic doctrines were appealing. The Church was badly split in Asia Minor and in Thyatira almost the entire church became Montanist. We know that by 177 A.D. it had spread even to Lyons since it was on this subject that St Irenaeus was sent on his mission to Rome. One of the chief heresies of the sect was the denial that the Church could forgive sins committed after baptism. In Africa Tertullian, a great apologist who became a Christian in about 190 A.D., took to Montanism as soon as he discovered it and broke from the Catholic Church in 207 A.D. As well as denying that the Church could forgive sins, Tertullian taught that Christians should never marry again after the death of a spouse and that they should not join the army or the civil service.

Montanists were eventually excommunicated and largely died out within a few generations, although we have evidence that there were still some Montanists in Phrygia in the late third century.

By 200 A.D. a clear picture had been established in which Christianity was divided between the Catholic Church, united under her bishops in communion with the See of Rome, with an established ministry, Rule of Faith and canon of Scripture and those various sects who clung to their own heterodox beliefs and practices. In the centuries ahead this was to become a familiar pattern, with the Church holding to Tradition while heretics embraced new doctrines in every age.

¹ Canon comes from the Greek and Latin words meaning rule. It is the same word that we use to describe the Canon of the Mass. When we say a document is canonical we mean that it belongs to the canon of books which are recognised as being of apostolic origin.

CHURCH HISTORY 4

ARIAN HERESY AND THE EARLY CHURCH COUNCILS

The persecutions of Diocletian, Galerian and Maxentius were the worst of the persecutions that the early Church suffered. No one could have predicted that not only would they suddenly come to an end, but that the Roman Empire as a whole would soon be converted to Christianity. Constantine the Great was the son of Constantius Chlorus, the tolerant western emperor, and of a Christian mother, St Helena. The first step towards toleration came in 312 with Constantine's victory over his western rival, Maxentius, at Milvian Bridge. Eusebius of Caesarea what Constantine himself had told him about the events which led up to this.

“He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, Conquer by this. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.

He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.”

The victory which followed made Constantine master of the west. In the east the persecutor, Galerian, had died in 311 and the new eastern emperor, Licinius, now joined with Constantine in decreeing a religious peace. This policy is set out in a letter to the governor of Bithynia and is called the Edict of Milan.

“When we, Constantine and Licinius, emperors, had an interview at Milan, and conferred together with respect to the good and security of the commonweal, it seemed to us that, amongst those things that are profitable to mankind in general, the reverence paid to the Divinity merited our first and chief attention, and that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best; so that that God, who is seated in heaven, might be benign and propitious to us, and to every one under our government. And therefore, we judged it a salutary measure, and one highly consonant to right reason, that no man should be denied leave of attaching himself to the rites of the Christians, or to whatever other religion his mind directed him, that thus the supreme Divinity, to whose worship we freely devote ourselves, might continue to vouchsafe His favour and beneficence to us. And accordingly, we give you to know that, without regard to any provisos in our former orders to you concerning the Christians, all who choose that religion are to be permitted, freely and absolutely, to remain in it, and not to be disturbed any ways, or molested.”

Previously confiscated church property was restored, crucifixion abolished, and Constantine himself ceased to participate in pagan worship. When Licinius and Constantine themselves went to war and Licinius was defeated in 324, Constantine became master of the whole Roman empire giving further reinforcement to its

Christianisation. Constantine was far from a model Christian, and, knowing that reasons of state would oblige him to commit moral crimes, he delayed his baptism until the very day of his death. But he built magnificent churches in Rome, Nicomedia, Antioch, Tyre and Jerusalem, removed pagan symbols from the Roman coinage and favoured Christians for high office. In 326 he moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople in the east, a policy partly motivated by his desire to have a Christian capital which Rome, at that time, could not be, given its traditional loyalty (and particularly that of the Senate) to the pagan gods. In 330 the New Rome was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. Constantine died in 337 and his son, Constantius (337-361) continued to promote Christianity at the expense of paganism. In 353 he prohibited pagan sacrifices and closed temples.

One of the unfortunate effects of Constantine's conversion, however, was that emperors now began to exercise a great degree of control over the Church. This was particularly true in the east where the new capital was based; in the west far less control was exerted. This factor had particularly grave consequences in the fourth century as new heresies arose. Whereas the Church had been free to deal with earlier heresies herself, she now had to contend with the might of the emperor in cases where imperial support was given to a particular heresy. As a result of this, the Arian heresy became far more of a threat to the Church than it probably would have been had the emperors not been involved, and at one time it came to threaten to completely overwhelm the Church.

From the earliest times the Church had believed that Christ was to be worshipped as God. When he wrote to the Romans asking them not to intervene to prevent his martyrdom, St Ignatius of Antioch pleaded with them "Suffer me to be an imitator of God's sufferings" and even the pagan Pliny reported that Christians "sing hymns to Christ as a god". But as men thought more deeply about in what sense Christ was God various wrong paths came to be taken. On the one hand there were modalists (so called because they thought that the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost were merely the same God manifesting Himself in different modes or appearances) such as the followers of Sabellius in second century Africa. Some, like St Dionysius of Alexandria, reacted against this heresy and went too far in the other direction. In order to emphasise that the Father and the Son were both real persons, separate from one another, he said that the Son was "made by God" and "did not exist until he was made". The Church was quick to react by condemning both extremes. Pope Dionysius of Rome sent a letter to Egypt condemning Sabellianism but also rejecting what Dionysius of Alexandria had written:

"Had the Son been created, there would have been a time when He was not; but the Son always was."

Dionysius of Alexandria came to agree with his namesake in Rome and so avoided heresy, whereas others who persisted in their errors, like Paul of Samosata, died as heretics outside the Church.

The greatest threat to the Church in the fourth century came from the teachings of the heretic Arius. He had been ordained a priest in Alexandria sometime after 311. In 318 the new bishop, Alexander, called a synod to investigate false teachings which

were spreading in the local church. At that synod Arius proclaimed the basis of his belief:

“If the Son is a real Son, then a Father must exist before a Son; therefore the Divine Father must have existed before the Divine Son. Therefore, there was a time when the Son did not exist. Therefore He is a creature; the greatest indeed and the eldest of all creatures and Himself a God, but still created; therefore like all creatures, of an essence and substance which previously had not existed”.

Arius next began to recruit bishops from outside Egypt to his cause. One particularly powerful supporter was Eusebius of Nicomedia who was a friend and kinsman of Constantine. In 320, when a synod in Alexandria condemned Arius’s teachings, he left for Nicomedia and there wrote a book called the *Thalia* (“The Banquet”). It concluded that:

“The essences of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are divided by nature, estranged, disjunct and without exchanges between them: thus they are totally dissimilar in essence and glory”.

Constantine wanted to keep the peace in the Church and could not really understand why these issues were important. Eusebius, who wrote a Life of Constantine, describes how he told both sides that they were arguing about small things which did not matter and which most people could not understand. Having tried to get the parties to agree, he summoned a large meeting of bishops to meet at the imperial palace in Nicaea in Bithynia. This was later to be seen as the first Ecumenical Council of the Church. In total 318 bishops of the Church attended the council. It must have been an amazing spectacle for the bishops assembled there. Only 12 years earlier many of these bishops had suffered persecution at the hands of Constantine’s predecessors. Now they assembled in his palace and witnessed his entry which Eusebius describes as that of:

“some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendour of gold and precious stones...”

Although the emperor wanted a compromise, the Catholics insisted on a formula which would exclude Arius’s errors. Various attempts were made which did not go far enough but eventually the non-Arian bishops brought forward the idea that the Son was “of the same substance” (*homoousios* in Greek). Eusebius of Nicomedia objected that the word was not in Holy Scripture but the council Fathers adopted it and drew up with Creed almost as we know it today.

Emperor Constantine fully supported the council and largely as a result of his influence only two bishops opposed the definition; they were exiled. However, Constantine’s sister, Constantia, supported Arius and managed later to send an Arian priest to the Emperor to persuade him that Arius had been wrongly condemned. Thus, despite the victory of orthodoxy at the council, the controversy soon erupted again. In Nicomedia Eusebius plotted the overthrow of the Nicene decrees and arranged a synod at Antioch which deposed the orthodox bishop and replaced him with an Arian. Meanwhile Arius was allowed back into Alexandria. By now Constantine was showing his sympathy with Arius and ordered Bishop Alexander to readmit him to communion. Alexander prayed that either he or Arius would die to

avoid such a sacrilege and a few days later Arius did indeed die. Arian bishops were becoming more and more prevalent and in 336 an Arian even became bishop of Constantinople. When Constantine was baptised on the day of his death it was even an Arian bishop who baptised him. However, things became even worse for the orthodox after Constantine's death. He had three sons, Constantine II, Constans and Constantius. The first two were orthodox but Constantius, who now ruled the eastern part of the empire, was an Arian.

The greatest opponent of Arius and one of the greatest Doctors of the Church was St Athanasius. He had been born in 295 and even as a child had been taken under the wing of the great bishop Alexander who saw his potential and prepared him for the priesthood. At the age of 25 he wrote "On the Incarnation of the Word of God". He attended Nicaea with his bishop as a deacon and, on Alexander's death, he succeeded him as Bishop of Alexandria. In order to discredit him the Arians accused him of monstrous crimes, including the murder of Bishop Arsenius and the using of his severed hand to do magic. When a council met at Tyre to examine the charges Athanasius was able to demonstrate his innocence when Bishop Arsenius appeared in person with both hands. Nevertheless, Athanasius feared that his enemies would convict him and fled to Constantinople where he appealed to the emperor. There his enemies invented yet new charges and he was found guilty and exiled to Treves. In all Athanasius was exiled five times from his diocese and he spent 17 of his 43 years as bishop outside his diocese. He spent some of this time living in hiding in secluded monasteries in the Egyptian desert. On one occasion he was travelling down the Nile and was confronted by soldiers searching for him. They asked him "Do you know where Athanasius is" and he replied "Not far from here" and was able to continue on his journey.

Almost the whole of the east had now become Arian and only a few bishops in the west supported Athanasius. This is the period of "Athanasius contra mundum" when he alone upheld the true doctrine of the Catholic Church. In 350 Constans died and Constantius became sole emperor determined to enforce Arianism even in the west. Under great pressure even Pope Liberius agreed to subscribe to Arian formulas, although he later repented of this and certainly never himself taught error. St Jerome famously said of this period that "*The world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian.*"

As so often happens with heresies, Arianism split into many different camps. The most extreme were those who said that the Son was not at all like the Father (*Anomoios*), whilst there was also a moderate party (Semi-Arians) who accepted the word *homoiousios* (meaning that the Son was of similar substance to the Father). In time the latter came to represent the majority and even they were alarmed by the more extreme versions of Arianism. St Athanasius was able to use this to his advantage and bring some Semi-Arians onto his side rather than accept the views of the extremists.

It is a sign of the danger which excessive imperial control could have over the church that it was the coming to power of the pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate in 361,

which contributed to the salvation of the Church from the Arian heresy. In order to sow confusion in the Church, Julian allowed the exiled Catholic bishops to return to their sees and this enabled them to fight back. After Julian had been killed, Valentinian, a Catholic, became emperor in the west and the Catholic cause again began to triumph there. Meanwhile in the east three great new champions of orthodoxy were raised up in Cappadocia, St Gregory of Nyssa, his brother St Basil the Great and their friend St Gregory of Nazianzus. The two brothers owed their faith to their grandmother, St Macrina, and their sister of the same name, and all three men wrote great books defending the Catholic faith against the Arians.

Their work was crowned with triumph at the Council of Constantinople in 381. By this time there were Catholic emperors in both the east and the west, Gratian and Theodosius. In 380 they issued an edict of uniformity against the Arians:

“We will that all the peoples who are ruled by the authority of our clemency shall hold to the religion which the Divine Apostle Peter delivered to the Romans and which is recognised by his having preserved it there until the present day... that is to say that according to the teaching of the apostles ... we should believe in one godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, in co-equal majesty and Holy Trinity. We order those who follow this law to take the name of Catholic Christians; all others, mad and insane, we condemn to the infamy of heresy...”

At the Council of Constantinople in 381 the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed along with a further clause affirming the divinity of the Holy Ghost which had been denied by yet another group of heretics. Arianism, which had threatened for sixty years to destroy the Church, had finally been vanquished in the empire, although by this time it had spread to some of the barbarian tribes in Germany and so would return to the west when the barbarian invasions began.

CHURCH HISTORY 5

EARLY MONASTICISM

One of the greatest contributions of Christianity to the spiritual world and to civilisation has been monasticism. Yet for almost the first two hundred years and more of her existence the Church had no monasteries or even organised hermits. There was, however, from the first an ascetic tradition in Christianity which existed alongside more normal Christian life in the world. Our Lord's teachings on renunciation of the world for the sake of the Kingdom of God inspired this tradition.

"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matt 19:22).

"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life." (Matt 19:29).

St Paul also taught the value of celibacy. He wrote to the Corinthians that it can be good for a Christian not to marry so that he can dedicate himself more to God. In the early Church we come across many men and women who chose not to marry but to live ascetic, chaste lives within their own family homes and this was a radical departure from the surrounding culture since in both pagan and Jewish circles getting married and raising a family was considered a person's first duty.

Persecution and martyrdom played a large part in the beginnings of monasticism. The Decian persecution in the 250s was particularly acute in Egypt and led many to flee Alexandria and the other cities for the desert where they could hide from their persecutors. These men and women were inspired by the example of their persecuted brethren and readily adapted to an ascetic way of life, usually living alone or in very small communities. When the persecutions ended, many of these people chose to stay in the desert where they had found that their way of life made them closer to God. Not only that but when the threat of martyrdom and persecution died down there was an inevitable weakening of the rigour with which people lived their faith. This led more of those who wanted to live an intense Christian life to seek ascetic ways of doing so by fleeing to the desert.

Saint Antony of Egypt is the key figure in the organisation of eastern monasticism. He was born near Heracleopolis Magna in 251 and lived to the great age of 105, dying in 356. We are very fortunate to have a detailed record of his life because the great St Athanasius was a friend of his and wrote a *Vita Antonii* after his death. He tells us that St Antony was the "son of well-born and devout parents" and we know that at their death, when he was only 18, he was left a fertile farm with 300 acres of land. However, he was already very devout like his parents and "burned with a desire for God and lived a life of simplicity at home". Shortly after this he went into a church where the Gospel was being read and heard the words of Our Lord from St Matthew's Gospel quoted above. He at once thought the words had been addressed directly to him and went out and immediately gave his land to the villagers. He then sold his other possession and, after providing for his sister, gave the money to the poor.

Antony now began to live a very ascetic life, living on his own but often going into the desert to visit the various hermits who were already living there. He particularly sought out those who exhibited specific virtues so that he could learn how to practise such virtues himself. Eventually he went to live in a tomb of a Christian martyr near

his home where he came into conflict with many demons. St Athanasius describes these conflicts:

“But the devil, who hates and envies what is good, could not endure to see such a resolution in a youth... First of all he tried to lead him away from the discipline, whispering to him the remembrance of his wealth, care for his sister, claims of kindred, love of money, the various pleasures of the table and the other relaxations of life, and at last the difficulty of virtue and the labour of it... But he, his mind filled with Christ and the nobility inspired by him, and considering the spirituality of the soul, quenched the coal of the other’s deceit... In the night, the demons made such a din that the whole of that place seemed to be shaken by an earthquake, and the demons as if breaking the four walls of the dwelling seemed to enter through them, coming in the likeness of beasts and creeping things. And the place was of a sudden filled with the forms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions and wolves... Altogether the noises of the apparitions, with their angry raging, were dreadful...”

After 15 years he moved from the tomb where he was living to a place of absolute solitude, crossing the Nile and shutting himself up in an old, abandoned fort on a mountain called Pispir. For twenty years he did not see a single person, eating only food thrown to him over the walls of the fort. He ate only bread, salt and water. During this time many people, hearing of his sanctity, came to visit him but he always refused to see them. Eventually, in about 305, his would-be disciples were so desperate to see him that they wrenched off the door of the fort by force. They were astonished by what they saw. Despite years of fasting and living a solitary life his body was unaffected by his sufferings. St Athanasius tells us that his body was completely unchanged, neither fat from lack of exercise nor thin from his fasting, but exactly as it had been 20 years earlier. He also tells us that his soul was “free from blemish”. He had attained perfect *apatheia* and was untouched either by grief or laughter, “for he was not troubled when he beheld the crowd, nor overjoyed at being saluted by so many”.

God now performed many miracles through Antony, curing many people of their ailments and casting out devils. He was also given great grace in speaking and persuaded many to embrace the solitary life. St Athanasius tells us that the desert became a city:

“He persuaded many to embrace the solitary life. And thus it happened in the end that cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was colonized by monks, who came forth from their own people, and enrolled themselves for the citizenship in the heavens...”

St Antony now devoted 5 or 6 years to the instruction and organisation of the great body of monks which had grown up around him. Eventually he withdrew again to a mountain within the inner desert and spent his last 45 years there.

Antony’s monks remained eremitical, living separately from one another in their own huts but coming together on Sundays for worship. Although they did not live under a formal rule to the extent that they were organised by Antony, they can be considered the first monastic community and Antony is called the Father of All Monks and often St Antony Abbot. At around the same time, St Pachomius created something which

was recognisable as a cenobitic life. He began, like Antony, as a hermit but seems to have had a vision in which he was instructed to gather other hermits around him into a monastic community. He established this community at Tabennisi and took upon himself the burden of administration so that his followers could continue to devote themselves to spiritual exercises as they had done as hermits. As more and more men flocked to join him, Tabennisi became too small and further monasteries were founded, so that there were nine for men and two for women by the time of his death in 346.

This meant that by the time St Antony and St Pachomius died the two types of monasticism, cenobitic and eremitical, were firmly established in Egypt. We have an excellent description of how the latter functioned from the pen of Palladius, a Palestinian monk who travelled to Egypt in 388 to study monasticism in the land of its birth. On arrival he spent 3 years learning from a hermit based 6 miles outside Alexandria called Dorotheus. Dorotheus never laid down to sleep but spent the whole day collecting stones to build cells for other hermits and the whole night weaving ropes out of palm leaves. Sometimes sleep would overcome him during his work. Palladius visited other hermits, meeting over 2,000 of them in total. At Nitria he found a huge community of over 5,000 hermits. All of these hermits lived alone, meeting for worship on Sundays. Palladius tells us that at the ninth hour the monks would sing the Psalms in their cells and that anyone hearing this would think that he had been caught up into Paradise.

A Pachomian monastery consisted of a collection of buildings surrounded by a wall. The monks were distributed into houses, each containing about 40 monks. There could be 30 or 40 houses in a monastery. Each house performed a different work – carpentry, agriculture etc. An Abbot was put in overall charge of the monastery. The Rule imposed a relatively light degree of asceticism on the monks who were then left free to adopt more rigorous disciplines if they so wished. For example, there would be a common table laid twice a day, except on fast days, but some monks would eat only once and some absent themselves entirely from the communal meal, eating only bread and salt in their cells.

Monasticism of the eremitical type spread throughout Egypt and then moved to Palestine. St Hilarion had been a disciple of St Antony and he started an eremitical monastery in Gaza and later one in Cyprus. Jerusalem and Bethlehem both had monasteries by the mid fourth century. The next most important figure in the history of early monasticism was St Basil the Great. He made a careful study of monasteries in Egypt and decided that he preferred the cenobitic type. He thought that some of the hermits had embraced too rigorous a life. The monasteries which he founded in Pontus had a gentler rule which emphasised the social value of the monastery as well as the focus on the individual salvation of the monks. He established the idea of communal prayer seven times a day – beginning at midnight. He did not have a Rule as such but laid down many principles in the form of answers to 313 questions.

Monasticism was therefore very much the creation of Eastern Christianity. It was first introduced into the west by St Athanasius when he visited Rome in 340, but little is known of these early Italian monasteries other than that they followed the model of St Antony. We know much more about the monasticism established in Gaul by St Martin of Tours. He was born in 316 at Sabaria. He joined the army and was sent to Amiens in Gaul. At the gates of the city on a very cold day he met a shivering

beggar and was moved to pity. He divided his cloak and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream in which he saw Our Lord telling one of his angels "Martin, still a catechumen, has wrapped him in this garment." After he had been discharged from military service, he wanted to return to Gaul to the diocese of St Hilary of Poitiers who had fought bravely against the Arians. Finally arriving there in 361, he embraced the life of a hermit. As had happened to St Antony and St Pachomius, St Martin attracted a large number of followers to the eremitical life, and they formed a community around him. He was so loved by the people that they wanted to make him Bishop of Tours, but he loved the monastic solitude and refused. The people then tricked him into leaving his monastery by sending someone to him who said that his wife was dying and needed his ministry. As soon as he entered the city the people acclaimed him as bishop leaving him with no choice but to accept. Even as a bishop, however, he continued to live in a cell just outside the city of Tours. Once again, many disciples flocked to him and this led to the foundation of a second monastery which still exists today, the Monastery of Marmoutiers.

The second great figure in the introduction of monasticism to Gaul was John Cassian. He had been trained in the monasteries of Palestine and Egypt but moved to Rome in 415 and then Marseilles where he founded the great Abbey of St. Victor. His monastery put into practice the ideals of the Egyptian monks with long fasts and strong asceticism. He wrote two books, "The Institutes" and the "Conferences" which laid down rules of life for the monks and which St Benedict was later to use in compiling his Rule.

Only with the coming of St Benedict did an authentic monasticism suited to the needs of the Western Church begin. He was born in 480 of noble Roman parents at Nursia. He was sent to school in Rome where he was so shocked by the lax moral standards of the time that he retired to Subiaco where he lived a life of solitude in a cave, giving himself to prayer, contemplation and asceticism. Eventually his retreat was discovered, and some neighbouring monks begged him to become their Abbot. When this didn't work out, he returned to his cave determined to remain a hermit. Again, however, his reputation for sanctity brought many disciples to him and he set up 12 communities each with 12 monks. The hostility of a local priest obliged him to move from Subiaco to Cassino where, on the mount which had once housed a temple of Apollo, he now founded a monastery.

A major contribution of St Benedict to the development of western monasticism was the establishment of a Rule which applied to all monasteries founded within the Order. This Rule has been described as "masterpiece of spiritual legislation". Its aim was nothing less than to make perfect Christians. It applied much less severe standards than Eastern monasticism. The monks were given good and ample food and even permitted to drink wine. The whole Rule is written in a gentle way:

"Son, listen to the precepts of your master; take them to your heart willingly. If you follow the advice of a tender father and travel the hard road of obedience, you will return to God from whom, by disobedience you have gone astray... I am to erect a school for beginners in the school of the Lord; which I hope to establish on laws not too difficult or grievous."

"Let the monks mutually surpass each other in reverence. Let them most patiently tolerate their weaknesses, whether of body or character; let them vie with each

other in showing obedience. Let no one pursue what he thinks useful for himself, but rather what he thinks useful for another. Let them love the brotherhood with a chaste love, let them fear God; let them love their abbot with a sincere and humble love; let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, who leads us alike to eternal life.”

However, the Rule did call for great seclusion. Monks were expected not to leave the monastery other than in cases of great necessity. There was a vow of stability which meant that monks should not even transfer to other houses. Whereas in the desert hermits had frequently moved around, sometimes even over very large distances, St Benedict called for a lifelong stability within a single monastery. This meant that monastic communities developed a very strong sense of family and of culture and was to be one of the great strengths of the Benedictine tradition. The Rule was written at Monte Cassino in the 15 years before St Benedict's death in 543, but it soon spread to other houses and within a couple of generations existed throughout the whole of Italy. By the reign of Charlemagne, it was almost the only form of monasticism which existed in Europe.

CHURCH HISTORY 6

ST AUGUSTINE AND THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE WEST

The different ways in which Christians thought about the empire in 310 A.D. and in 410 A.D illustrate how dramatically the position of Christians had changed during those 100 years. At the start of that period Christians were still the victims of harsh persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities and the Empire was still often spoken of by Christians, much as it had been by Tertullian in the 180s, as a malign force punishing God's saints. By the end of the period Christianity had become the official religion of the empire and many Christians saw the empire in almost sacral terms, as if it were difficult to imagine Christianity without it. When the city of Rome was sacked in 410 by Alaric the Visigoth, St Jerome spoke for many when he wrote:

“But when the bright light of all the world was put out, or rather, when the Roman empire was decapitated and, to speak more correctly, the whole world perished in one city, I became dumb and humbled myself, and kept silence from good words.... Everything, however long, has its end... and all that grows undergoes decay and death... But Rome! Who would have believed that Rome, built up by the conquest of the whole world, had collapsed, that the mother of nations had become also their tomb?”

The crisis which the sack of 410 provoked was to inspire the writing of one of the greatest works of Christian literature ever produced in the West, St Augustine's *City of God (De Civitate Dei)*. In this work St Augustine rebuts the charge that Christianity has been the cause of the fall of Rome and puts forward a view of history which sees the world as made up of two kingdoms, or cities, that of those destined for salvation and those destined to be lost. In this view of history earthly kingdoms rise and fall but the City of God abides forever.

St Augustine was born in November 354 in the small Numidian town of Thagaste. His father, Patricius, was a pagan and his mother, St Monica, a devout Catholic Christian. Although St Monica had her son signed with the cross and enrolled as a catechumen, she did not have him baptised in childhood. However, it was clearly St Monica rather than her pagan husband who influenced St Augustine's childhood and he tells us later, in his *Confessions*, that

“The Name of Thy Saviour and Son had my tender heart, even with my mother's milk, devoutly drunk in and deeply treasured; and whatsoever was without that Name, though never so learned, polished and true, took not entire hold on me.”

St Augustine was a brilliant student at Carthage where he mastered Latin literature, loving especially Cicero and Virgil. However, his father died early in 370 and Augustine had to take up teaching in order to earn the money needed to look after his family. Unfortunately, at around this time he began to live a very sensual life and to lose his affection for the Christian faith. At the age of 17 he took a mistress who bore him a son, Adeodatus (given by God), in 372. Shortly after this he fell prey to an even worse danger, the heresy of Manicheism. The Manichees were followers of the Persian dualist, Mani, who lived from 215-76 and who had developed a form of Gnostic dualism combining elements of Christianity with those of various Persian religions. Like all dualists Mani had despised the Old Testament and it was partly Augustine's own dislike of the Old Testament as a text which he thought vastly inferior to the classical Latin texts which led him into this error. For 9 years Augustine followed the heresy and won many Catholics over to it.

During all of this period St Monica waited patiently, praying for her son's conversion. Although when he first became a Manichee she would not even eat with him, she was told in a dream not to despair but that where she stood her son would one day stand. A bishop whom she once told of her sorrow said to her "Go thy ways, and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish."

By 384 Augustine was becoming disillusioned with Manicheism. By now he had discovered Plato's doctrine that the goal of all philosophy is to seek God as the ultimate Being and Truth and he started to see that evil is not a positive substance, as Mani taught, but a privation or absence of the Good. In that year he moved to Milan to teach and there he fell under the influence of St Ambrose, the saintly bishop of that city. He describes how he would go to the cathedral to listen to St Ambrose:

"I loved him not at first as a teacher of the truth (which I utterly despaired of in Thy Church), but as a person kind towards myself. And I listened diligently to him; I hung on his words attentively, but of the matter I was careless and a scornful looker-on... and yet I was drawing nearer little by little unconsciously. And while I opened my heart to hear how eloquently he spoke, there also entered how truly he spoke."

Augustine now sent away his mistress, but he still resisted receiving baptism and clung to some sins. He then read St Athanasius's *Life of Antony* which opened his mind to see his sins more clearly. Shortly afterwards, whilst he was in his house with a friend, Alypius, he learnt of two Roman officers who had been converted, resigned their commissions and embraced the monastic life. He ran outside into the garden and there heard a child singing "Take up and read". He opened the letters of St Paul at random and read the words from the Epistle to the Romans:

"not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chamberings and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh and its lusts."

Augustine was finally converted from his sinful life and at once told his mother who rejoiced, as she had prayed for so long that he would find the true faith.

In 391 Augustine returned to his native North Africa and took holy orders in Hippo. In 395 he became its bishop which he was to remain for 35 years until his death. As well as working tirelessly in his diocese and writing a huge number of theological works, St Augustine fought two major battles against heresy, the first against Donatism, the second against the Pelagians.

When Augustine became bishop of Hippo the entire North African church had been divided for 85 years by the Donatist schism and more or less every town had both a Catholic and a Donatist church. The schism had originated in the days of the persecutions of Diocletian. In 311 Caecilian had been elected bishop of Carthage on the death of the saintly Mensurius. His opponents claimed that those who consecrated him had been *traditores* and that this meant that his consecration was invalid. They accordingly elected a rival bishop, Majorinus, who was succeeded shortly afterwards by Donatus. Soon two rival hierarchies grew up throughout the region. The Catholics denied that Caecilian's consecrators had been *traditores* but also argued that in any case the validity of sacraments did not depend upon the moral standing of the ministers. Although strictly speaking the Donatists were

schismatics rather than heretics they came to develop a heretical view of the sacraments whereby only worthy ministers could administer valid sacraments. They applied this not only to ordination but to baptism and so did not recognise the validity of the baptisms performed by Catholics. This different view of the sacraments led in turn to the Donatists having a more puritanical view of the Church. The Donatists whitewashed the walls of their churches whilst the Catholics had wall paintings, and the Donatists insisted on the purity of their members whereas the Catholics affirmed that the Church contained sinners as well as saints. The strongest argument of all in the Catholics' favour was that their church was in communion with all of the churches of the world (and especially the church of Rome) whereas the Donatists were in communion with no-one outside North Africa.

For most of the 85 year history of the schism the two churches had lived side by side without any serious attempts to bring the schism to an end. There were occasional acts of violence on both sides. The Donatists included wandering bands of Berbers, called Circumcellions, who would wander between the cells of various martyrs and commit atrocities against Catholic churches. In turn, in 347 the Emperor Constans had sent his general, Macarius, to carry out acts of repression against the Donatists. Now Augustine felt that it was wrong to allow such a schism to persist. At first, he was opposed to the idea of forced conversions since he thought they were unlikely to be sincere, however he gradually came to the view that since schism was a profound sin against charity, even insincere conversions were preferable. He also thought that once converted a person might begin to become more genuinely Catholic. He cited the text in St Matthew's gospel where the host of the wedding feast tells his servants to "Compel them to come in" as biblical sanction for state coercion. In 411 a conference was held at Carthage with imperial commissioners and following this the Emperor Honorius proscribed Donatism, imposing fines on Donatists and confiscating their property. However, before these imperial persecutions could have much effect North Africa suffered invasion by the Arian Vandals and they persecuted both Catholics and Donatists. Ultimately the Donatists survived until the Muslim invasions of the seventh century, after which they rapidly died out.

The second major heresy which St Augustine was to fight was Pelagianism. In 400 A.D. a British monk called Pelagius visited Rome and there began teaching that man could be saved by his own efforts and natural powers and that Adam's sin was personal and not inherited by his descendants. In 411 he visited North Africa and left behind him a disciple, Celestius, who began to spread Pelagian teachings in a large area around Carthage. As we have seen so often before it was the teaching of novel doctrines which led the Church to formulate the truth more precisely and between 412 and 427 St Augustine wrote 15 treatises in response to Pelagius and Celestius. These have earned him the title Doctor of Grace and established the existence of original sin, the necessity of infant baptism for salvation, the impossibility of life without sin and the need for grace. In 416 councils at Carthage and Mileve both condemned Pelagius's propositions and appealed to Pope Innocent I for his support. It was in respect of Innocent's support that Augustine wrote his famous *causa finita est* ("the matter is settled") though, in fact, the arguments continued. A further council of Carthage condemned Pelagian views in 418 and this was backed up by an encyclical from Pope Zozimus but even then 18 Italian bishops had to be deposed and exiled for their support of Pelagius.

We have seen that St Augustine wrote *De Civitate Dei* in response to pagan attacks on Christianity after the fall of Rome in 410. For a number of years the Germanic tribes, Vandals, Visigoths, Tervingi, Lombards and others had been themselves under pressure from the Asiatic Huns. In 401 Alaric, King of the Visigoths, invaded Italy. Legions were withdrawn from many parts of the empire to defend Italy. Four years later the Goths crossed the Danube and invaded Italy. Alaric invaded again in 408 but was narrowly defeated near Rome. In 410 the new emperor, Hadrian, abandoned Britain in order to have more legions to defend Italy. In 426 the Vandals invaded Hispania and from there took North Africa. Eventually almost every province had suffered barbarian invasions of one kind or another: Asia Minor by the Goths, Cappadocia and Syria by the Huns, Britain by Angles, Saxons and Jutes. These invasions changed the face of the empire so that there was now a Lombard kingdom in Italy, a Visigothic kingdom in Spain, a Frankish kingdom in Gaul and seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Britain.

When Odoacer deposed the last emperor in the west, Romulus Augustulus, in 476 and made himself King of Italy, the Church was the only institution to outlive the ruin of the western empire. With the exception of the Franks, who remained pagans, almost all of the invaders were tribes who had been converted to Arian Christianity in the fourth century. The religious policies of the invaders varied: the Goths and Burgundians were generally tolerant towards their Catholic subjects, but the Vandals in Africa persecuted the Catholics and Donatists and handed church property over to Arian clergy. In many parts of the Empire Catholic bishoprics were filled by Roman patricians who used their episcopal office to co-operate administratively with the new barbarian rulers without having to compromise their religious faith.

The Franks became established in Gaul in 485. In 493 the Frankish King, Clovis, married Clotilda, a devout Catholic princess and thanks to her influence and prayers he converted to Catholic Christianity rather than the Arianism of his neighbours. Like Constantine before him, he ascribed a great victory of his to the help of the Christian God. When he was fighting the Alamanni at the Battle of Tolbiac he was faced with a likely defeat and turned to his wife's God saying:

"Thou art said to give aid to those in stress, and to grant victory to those that hope in thee, I entreat from a devout heart the glory of thy succour. If thou grant me victory over these enemies... then will I also believe in thee and be baptised in thy name."

At that very moment the Alamanni turned and fled. He was baptised on Christmas Day 496 and the vast majority of his people followed his example. According to legend the chrism for his baptism was carried from Heaven by a dove. Kept at Rheims Cathedral, it was used for the coronation of subsequent Kings of France. The Franks now became zealous Catholics and drove Arianism from Gallic soil. By the mid-sixth century Gaul was recovered for Catholicism but most of the rest of what had been the Roman empire remained under Arian rule until the late sixth century when Swabi, Burgundians and Visigoths converted to Catholicism.

CHURCH HISTORY 7

THE RISE OF ISLAM AND THE DEFENCE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEST

By the end of the sixth century the Church in the west had taken up her place in the various nations which had replaced the Roman Empire whilst the Eastern part of the Empire, ruled from Constantinople, continued the traditions of Christian empire which went back to the time of Constantine. All of that was about to change as the result of a new religion which was starting to develop thousands of miles away in the Arabian peninsula. This religion was within a very short time to conquer huge parts of what had long been Christian lands and was to come close to engulfing the whole of Christendom.

Arabia had long been a land of many conflicting religions. There were large settlements of Jewish and Christian peoples along the shore of the Red Sea but most of the country was overrun by polytheistic nomadic tribes who were constantly at war with one another. For all of them Mecca was a city of great importance because it housed the Caaba which contained the nearly cuboid “black stone” which was said to have come down from paradise whiter than milk but which had been turned black by the sins of those who touched it. The Kaaba by now contained about 360 pagan idols and the many festivals which were held there were a source of great wealth to the Koraish clan who were guardians of the shrine.

In this city of Mecca, around 570, Mohammed was born into the Koraish clan. At a relatively early age on commercial travels to Syria and Palestine he encountered Jewish and Christian communities. He formed an imperfect understanding of many of their ideas which he was to borrow for his own religion. He was also influenced by the Hanifs of Medina, Mecca and Taif who were disillusioned with paganism and sought a purer kind of religion. The Hanifs had embraced a strict monotheism, believed in an after life in which the good were rewarded and the bad punished and abstained from wine and other indulgences. Having come under their influence Mohammed withdrew into the desert where he later claimed that around 612 the angel Gabriel had commanded him to destroy idolatry. He soon gained followers and proclaimed a new religion called Islam which means “submission to the will of God”. His followers were called Muslims, “those who have submitted to God”.

Rather like the silversmiths of Ephesus, the ruling families feared that Mohammed’s puritanical monotheism would undermine their wealth and they began to persecute his followers in Mecca, leading Mohammed to flee to Medina in 622 where the large Jewish community at first welcomed him even wondering if he could be the Messias. This flight of Mohammed is called the Hijrah and the Islamic calendar dates from his arrival in Medina. At first, he seems to have tried to win over Jews and Christians to his religion but when this failed he turned to the conversion of pagans.

Once he had won enough converts he raised an army and, having conquered several tribes, he entered Mecca triumphantly in 630. He made Mecca the Holy City of Islam and the Caaba Islam’s shrine now purged of its paganism. He died in 633. After his death Abu-Bekr became the first Caliph, or universal ruler of Islam combining secular and sacred roles in one person since Islam did not recognise a division

between the two. Abu-Bekr began the recording of Mohammed's spoken words which eventually formed the Koran.

Unfortunately for the Church one of Mohammed's key concepts was that of jihad, or Holy War, which he believed God commanded his followers to carry out in order to increase the land of Islam. Although Christians and Jews, so called "children of the book", were not treated as badly as pagans, all non-Muslims were regarded as enemies to be subdued by the sword. The children of the book could then be allowed to keep their own religion on payment of a tax called the jizya. The Islamic conquests were remarkably rapid and were helped by the religious fanaticism of the Muslims and the chronic weaknesses of their enemies. The Byzantine and Persian empires had been locked in devastating warfare between 602 and 628 which meant that both were exhausted by the time of the Islamic attacks after 633. The schisms of Nestorius and Eutyches had further weakened the Byzantine empire, dividing the church and leaving many disaffected schismatics who were at first willing to accept conquest rather than Byzantine rule. Islam was also led by a series of brilliant and powerful Califs.

As a result, Jerusalem had been conquered by 638, only 5 years after Mohammed's death. Alexandria fell in 642 followed by Persia in 651 and Carthage in 698. Christianity was practically wiped out in Africa. There were 40 bishops there at the time of the Islamic conquests and by 1076 this had fallen to only 2. By the early twelfth century there were no Christians left in the lands of Tertullian, St Cyprian and St Augustine of Hippo. The Byzantine Empire had now lost all three of its original patriarchates, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. This meant that Constantinople became the main centre of eastern Christianity paving the way for its rivalry with Rome. The presence of the Arabs between east and west was to make communication between the two parts of the church more difficult and contribute to their growing apart. At the same time the Slavs also became a barrier as they settled on the Danube and moved down the Dalmatian coast into Macedonia and the Peloponnese.

Meanwhile Islam was also making rapid inroads into western Europe. Arabs and Moors crossed the straits of Gibraltar in 711 and rapidly defeated the Visigothic kingdom of Spain. By 732 the Muslim armies had crossed the Pyrenees into southern France and had reached the banks of the River Loire. There they finally met their match in Charles Martel, "a lion in the path".

The Franks had been converted to Catholic Christianity after the baptism of Clovis, one of the early Merovingian kings. Gradually the Merovingian dynasty had become weak, and power had shifted into the hands of the Mayor of the Palace. This was the position which Charles Martel held when he won his great victory at the Battle of Tours in 731, followed by further victories at Poitiers in 732 and Avignon in 737. As a result of these victories the Muslims were thrown back over the Pyrenees, although they continued to rule parts of Spain for many centuries more.

Charles Martel's son, Pepin the Short, deposed the last Merovingian king and inaugurated the Carolingian dynasty which was to have great importance for the church in the west. In order to legitimise his usurpation, Pepin turned to Pope Zacharias II. The pope was under threat from the Lombards and it suited him to make an alliance with Pepin. Pepin asked the pope:

“In regard to the kings of the Franks who no longer possess the royal power: is this state of things proper?”

The pope replied that it was not proper and that,

“It is better to give the title of king to the one who holds power”.

This gave Pepin the authority to depose the last of the Merovingians and to make himself king. However, as well as bringing about the strengthening of Christian rule in France the alliance of Frankish king and pope was also to have a lasting and profound effect on the papacy. Pepin now invaded Italy to protect the pope from his Lombard enemies and in 756 gave to the pope temporal rule over all the lands around Rome of the defeated Lombards. This act constituted the formation of the Papal States which gave the pope temporal as well as spiritual power and was to last until 1870.

The son of Pepin was Charles, known to history as Charlemagne and much of the later history of the Catholic Church in Europe was the result of his achievements. He is sometimes called “The Father of Europe” because he was the first to reunite Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. In 754 Pope Stephen III had crossed the Alps to crown and anoint King Pepin as well as his two sons, Charlemagne and Carloman. Charles was only 8 years old at the time. When Pepin died in 768 his vast empire was divided between his two sons. In 771 Carloman died and Charles was sole king. At this time the papacy was again under threat from the Lombards and Pope Adrian I appealed to Charles who crossed the Alps. The Lombards were defeated and driven to Pavia where Charlemagne besieged them and, after their defeat, made himself King of Lombardy. At Easter 773 Charles arrived at Rome where the pope awaited him at the top of a long staircase. Charles showed his great reverence for the Church and the See of St Peter by ascending it on his knees. The Pope escorted him into St Peter’s Basilica. Charles extended the Papal States giving an even larger secular territory to the pope who, in return, named him “Patrician of the Romans”.

Another of Charles’s great contributions to Christianity was his conquest of the Saxons. Unlike many of the barbarian tribes who had been converted to Arian Christianity, the Saxons had remained pagan. Because they made periodic raids into Frankish territory, frequently burning churches, Charles determined to put an end to their independence. Between 772 and 803 there was a fierce war between the Franks and the Saxons with the Franks gradually penetrating further and further into Saxony. As they did so Charles built strong fortresses and churches. Harsh measures were adopted to coerce the Saxons into conversion. The establishment of bishoprics and abbeys and the work of such missionaries as St Sturm and St Ludger gradually brought about the conversion of the Saxons.

Charlemagne also played an important part in rolling back the Islamic control of Spain. In 778 he crossed the Pyrenees and took Pamplona and Barcelona. Unfortunately, Saragossa held out and the Franks were not able to hold onto more than a small strip of northern Spain but this would be a foothold from which the later Reconquista could be launched.

In 799 Charles learnt that the new pope, Leo III, had been physically attacked in Rome by a group of conspirators and driven from the city. Charlemagne received the

pope at Paderborn and sent him back in triumph to Rome with an armed guard. In the following year, 800, Charlemagne himself went to Rome. On Christmas Day Pope Leo crowned him as Charles the Augustus Emperor of the Romans. The Roman Empire of the west had been restored. There was great significance in the events of these years. A strong alliance had been established between the King of the Franks, now the Emperor, and the papacy. Each ruled supreme in his own sphere, with the Emperor seeing it as his duty to protect the pope and being dependent upon him for his coronation and anointing. This magnificent concept of a single Christian Empire ruled spiritually by the pope and temporarily by the Emperor was rarely to succeed in practice beyond the days of Charlemagne and contained within itself the seeds of many centuries of conflict between the two powers.

THE ICONOCLAST CONTROVERSY

From the earliest times Catholics had believed in the intercession of saints. The Incarnation meant that matter was capable of conveying spiritual grace and so the relics of the saints came to be venerated as a way of bringing the worshipper into the presence of the saint whose earthy remains they were. In later centuries, as Christian art developed, holy images also came to be seen as sacramentals which could mediate the presence of the saints, of Our Lady and of God Himself. By the fifth century we find deeply devotional works of art in the churches of Rome and Byzantium and the idea began to develop that these images act like relics as windows into Heaven through the holy figures represented. By 570 we find a number of *acheiropoieta*, images believed not to have been made by human hands but miraculously given. Some of these images were believed to be *palladia*, that is to say objects on which the safety of a city or nation was thought to depend. For example, the Image of Camuliana (an image of Christ) in Constantinople was believed to have saved Constantinople from the siege by the Persians of 626 when the Patriarch paraded it around the walls. The belief became strong that praying before an image was, like praying before a relic, a way of being closer to the divine and so of making one's prayers more effective. The Council of Trullo in 692 stated that the Incarnation meant that the creation of images of sacred subjects was no longer prohibited as it had been in Judaism.

It is not entirely clear what caused the iconoclastic reaction against this growing popular piety, although there is a theory that the devastation caused by the submarine volcanic eruption in the Aegean in 726 might have been blamed by iconoclasts on the superstitious use of icons. Others think that Islam may have had an influence, but it is difficult to see why this should have been the case. At some point between 726 and 730 the Emperor Leo III is said to have ordered the removal of the image of Christ which had been placed over the ceremonial entrance to the Great Palace of Constantinople and its replacement with a simple cross. A group of iconodules murdered some of those charged with its removal. In 730 an edict of Leo III, which had no ecclesiastical authority, forbade the veneration of religious images. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Germanos I, was deposed for defending icons. In the West Pope Gregory III held two synods which condemned Leo's actions.

Leo died in 741 and was succeeded by his son, Constantine V. He was strongly opposed to icons from the first and in 754 summoned the Council of Heira which discussed religious imagery. Over 330 bishops attended. The council, which claimed

to be the seventh ecumenical council, declared against icons which it called unlawful and blasphemous. However, no Patriarch was present, and Rome did not approve its decrees. Saint John of Damascus, a Syrian monk living in the Caliphate of Damascus and so outside Byzantine territory, wrote great theological works opposing iconoclasm. He wrote that he worshipped the creator and not matter

“But I also venerate the matter through which salvation came to me, as if filled with divine energy and grace.”

Constantine V had relics removed from churches and monasteries and thrown into the sea. It may be that not all monasteries defended the icons but many of those which did were closed and their monks expelled.

Constantine VI came to the throne in 780 and his mother, Irene, was regent during his childhood. She called a council which ultimately became the Second Council of Nicaea and met in 786 and again in 787 when it reversed the decrees of the previous council. It decreed that:

“venerable and holy images are to be dedicated in the holy churches of God, namely the image of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our immaculate Lady the Holy Theotokos, and of the angels and all the saints. They are to be accorded the veneration of honour, not indeed the true worship paid to the divine nature alone, but in the same way as this is accorded to the life-giving cross, the holy gospels and other sacred offerings.”

This time papal legates were present and so this council was legitimately the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Icon restoration continued throughout the reigns of the Empress Irene and her successor, Nikephoros I (802-811). The papacy had consistently taken an iconodule position.

A second period of iconoclasm began under Leo V in 815. He appointed a commission of monks to investigate the question of images. They discovered the acts of the Iconoclastic Council of 754. Patriarch Nikephoros defended icons but a synod held in Constantinople followed Leo's lead and again condemned images. A succession of emperors were iconoclasts until the succession of Michael III when another empress regent, Theodora, presided over the restoration of the icons in 843. In the Eastern Church the first Sunday of Great Lent is celebrated as the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

The arguments in favour of icons were that:

- The incarnation superseded the OT prohibition of images since God Incarnate has taken on to Himself visible matter.
- Icons were not idols. The latter depicted false gods, the former real and holy people.
- Icons were part of the Holy Tradition.
- Acheiropoieta and other miracle working demonstrated divine approval of icons.