

HIS0001 – Early Medieval Church – Module 2

When Christianity came to the Roman Empire it performed perhaps one of the most significant cultural revolutions in the history of the West. In general, Christian values stood directly opposed to those values of classical thought, that is, of the Greco-Roman tradition. This tradition taught that man ought to seek the good life today, here in this world, in the present world, and for the Romans, that meant the Empire. Christianity taught that our earthly existence was merely a preparation for life after death. Our life on earth was temporary, a stopping off point before the journey into eternal life. The visible world was a world of exile.

Christianity first appeared as yet another mystery religion or mystery cult. For many mystery cults, salvation was to come from a person's association, through a mystical rite, with a hero who had conquered death. Jesus was one such hero. He claimed the faith of his followers because he had risen from the dead. Unlike other mystery cults, however, salvation for the Christian required rituals, mysteries and sacraments. It required a moral life as well. Jesus was also an historical figure -- he was a real man, not some mythical hero as other mystery cults had taught.

From about 100 to 337, the Church in the Empire remained an illegal and persecuted sect. Still, the Church succeeded in adding to its numbers. It also developed a coherent body of theological and administrative opinion. By the early 4th century, the Christian faith had penetrated much of the world of the Roman Empire: it was the largest single religion within the Empire. The reasons for this growth are diverse. For instance Jewish communities were scattered throughout the Empire and Christians moving from community to community could preach their ideas in Jewish synagogues. The Christians also inherited the sacred writings of the Jews with the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament (written in Hebrew). And following the Council of Nicea in 325, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament (written in Greek) were also available. Christianity also held out the promise of man's ultimate salvation, that the meek shall inherit the world.

Christian and Jew alike, however, were persecuted for their failure to follow the Roman civil religion. This religion asked for public loyalty to the state, to the genius of Rome, and to the traditional pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses. Christian and Jew refuse to make this concession. As a result, they became the objects of hatred and contempt among the largely

pagan population. The number of persecutions was relatively small but even the death of one person had wide significance for this person became a martyr. This was an unintended consequence of Roman persecution. The martyrs became important because they had died holding true to their faith. We have images in our minds, mostly provided by Hollywood, of Christians and Jews being thrown to starving lions in the circus, or being tied to stakes and burned alive. The fact that many of them never cried out as they were about to die a horrible death must have impressed many in the audience. How could these people not suffer at the hands of a merciless death, they asked themselves. Their god must be a powerful one -- their faith must be one without parallel. And so, the martyrs stood as supreme symbols of faith and integrity.

The conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century was a political and psychological event. He tried to bring the Christian church into government affairs at Constantinople. This was a typically Roman notion: don't dominate, accommodate. By the 330s, for instance, Constantine extended complete freedom of worship to all Christians, he returned confiscated property, he allowed the church own property without paying taxes. Although Constantine made Christianity the favoured religion of the Empire, it did not become an established or formal religion until 391, the year in which the emperor Theodosius (c.346-395) outlawed heresy and closed all Roman pagan temples.

Christian intellectuals, or theologians, within the Roman Empire now quickly embarked on elaborating a systematic theology. In other words they had to create a body of beliefs to which all Christians would accept. They also developed a systematic government within the church. They believed themselves to be, as had the Jews before them, a community of people united by faith as well as by discipline. This sense of unity among them became the foundation for two things: (1) a constitution of the church, which set down laws and determined authority; and, (2) dogma, that is a collection of fixed opinions based on the authority the church.

The most significant development was that of a formal government within the church. Bishops became church leaders and had authority over priests who in turn presided over the faithful followers. This political structure gave the Christians a stable form of government no other religion had ever enjoyed. Church government even rivalled that of the Romans state, at least until Christianity became the favoured religion under Constantine. The number of bishops in the early Church was never large, so bishops had authority over large areas of territory. And there were some cities, such as Rome and Alexandria, which claimed superior authority over all

others. Eventually, a bishop of Rome became the head of the Church and took the title "papa" or father and would eventually call himself Pope. By 300, the church had assumed all the characteristics that would be preserved down through the Middle Ages: a form of government, a theology, sacred books, rituals, martyrs, saints and of course, the faith of its believers.

Equally effective in the general diffusion of Christian ideas and Christianity in general was the monastic movement. Those Christians who joined monasteries were attempting to live a life of "ascetic ideals." The individual who lived by such ideals fled from the world in order to devote himself to worship. By denying oneself earthly or material pleasure the monks became the heroes of Christian civilization because they were the visible examples of man's faith in the Word of God.

The man who went off by himself to live and worship as a hermit found that he could not do it alone. What was needed was a community of worshipers and so by the 5th century the idea of the monastery gained a powerful appeal in the west. In Ireland, entire clans and tribes adopted the monastic life. They elected an "abbot," a lay person who lived at the monastery and who managed all contact with the outside world. Irish monks traveled throughout the Continent, founding monasteries along the way.

Of the monastic movement in general, however, it was St. Benedict (c.480-c.543) of Italy who brought order to the monastic movement. Benedict drew up a rule for the monastic communities which were based on needs and functions. The constitution he developed endowed the abbot with full authority -- he was elected for life could not be replaced. Part of the Benedictine Rule was that all monks were to say prayers at regular intervals of the day and night. All monks were also required to labor -- this gave labor the dignity the Romans had denied.

Benedict established twelve, small monastic communities during his lifetime, the most important located at Monte Cassino, near Naples. The monks influenced nearly every aspect of early medieval life. They were the most successful farmers. They managed large estates and set examples for good farming practice. They were also the most literate and learned people. They organized "scriptoria" or writing offices where they copied manuscripts -- both secular and religious -- and decorated or "illuminated" manuscripts. European kings and princes recruited monks as officials and nearly all administrative records of the period were written by monastic scribes.

The monasteries were important because their communal organization allowed the monks to cope with the problems of the age while at the same time they became heroes of Christian civilization. They escaped from the disorder of their times but not individually. Rather, monastic communities, such as Monte Cassino, gathered together these devout monks. Some would work in the fields, others in the bakeries, and still others would tend to the wine presses. But the ascetic temperament taught the monks to save and invest in the future. By denying themselves luxuries or by not consuming immediately all that they produced, the monks had considerable economic success.

Saving for the future made sense to the Benedictine monk. Saving also fitted well with their ascetic ideal of self-denial in a world of material pleasures. During the seventh and eighth centuries, the Celtic (Irish) and Benedictine monasteries played a vital role in the Christianization of the former Roman Empire. But over time, they ceased to be communities that fostered any sort of deeply personal religion. At their worst, they were subject to exploitation by the lay abbots. At their best, they became spiritual communities which existed to serve the interests of their aristocratic founders.

The influence of the church in this period was absolute. It can hard with our modern outlook to understand how religion influenced every part of your daily life but that was the reality all Christians dealt with. As we move through the next modules, you will see how the lines between religion and politics mix and begin to blur.