

# **PEOPLE OF GOD**

## **THE HISTORY OF CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY**

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# PREFACE

**WHAT IS CHURCH HISTORY?** What is it not? To some extent, the answer to that question is in the eye of the beholder. But not entirely.

## A VOYAGE TO THE DEPTHS

Suppose we were oceanographers examining the wreck of the *Titanic* through the lenses of “Alvin,” Dr. Robert Ballard’s deep-water submarine that was the first human instrument to explore the sunken ship after it had lain undetected for seventy-four years. What would grab our attention as we curled our way up and around the grand staircase, or cruised carefully over the deck toward the bridge? Would we engage in a hunt for missing jewels? Would we wonder how the musicians of the chamber ensemble managed to stand courageously and play their final piece as the frigid water rushed over their feet and ankles?

Would we grow angry at the cowardice of the White Star Line’s owner, Bruce Ismay, as he shoved his way into a lifeboat ahead of the other passengers? Would we wonder why the *California* ignored Captain Smith’s distress signals and sailed away without coming to the drowning ship’s rescue? Once we had returned to the deck of our mother ship on the surface and faced the media’s questions, what memories from the depths would be the most urgent for us to share?

Naturally our answers would differ if we were actually a scientist like Dr. Ballard, as opposed to a moviegoer who sat tearfully through the film *Titanic*, mourning the fate of the young lovers, Jack and Rose, who were separated by death as the floating behemoth sank beneath the North Atlantic on April 14, 1912. The scientist in us might have remembered only technical details, such as the angle at which the two parts of the huge hull had split apart. The Romantic in us might have thought only of the scene on the prow, where the two young lovers had stood breathlessly facing the wind, sailing toward a new life of freedom and bliss.

As I approached this book, I struggled with that part of me that is scientist and that part which is romantic, trying to mediate between the two, hoping that by doing so I could maintain a viewpoint that would bring to the surface

the essence of Church<sup>1</sup> history. Naturally I could not scoop up everything that the great treasure of the Church's history holds and examine it for you the reader. I had to take a certain stance.

My stance is this. Judging from what is most important in the life of the Church, from our vantage point today, what stands out as having been most significant during our twenty-century existence? It seems to me that what stands out most noticeably, and with greatest effect on our life as Church today, is the relationship which the Church has had with the world. Hence this book is principally about the love-hate, up-and-down, tumultuous, perplexing, vexing, paradoxical struggle we the Church have been engaged in for twenty centuries to define our self-image and mission while having to relate to a value system that does not share our vision of reality. For that, after all, is what I mean by "world," *i.e.*, a system of values that is opposed to the gospel, as in the Scripture passage which proclaims that Jesus' disciples do not "belong to the world any more than I belong to the world" (John 17:16). Somewhat along the lines of Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part One*, a short synopsis of this Church-world story might be rendered as follows:

### HISTORY OF THE CHURCH RECITED WHILE STANDING ON ONE LEG

We the Church start out as the world's hated enemy. The world tries to eliminate us. But we turn the tables on the world and convert its leaders to our cause. These leaders, however, don't fully understand what the Church's mission is, and attempt to substitute their earthly power for the Church's spiritual authority. Things go downhill from there, and the world turns the tables on us. The world converts our leaders to its cause, and we become too worldly to proclaim the gospel with much credibility. Schisms, revolts, breakaways within the Church follow. Then, we the Church, realizing that the Church-world relationship is too hot to handle, decide to withdraw from the affair altogether. We climb behind the walls of our fortress and simply condemn anything that looks like the world. This goes on until a short, pudgy Pope named John XXIII decides to open a window on the world in order to see if we can start the dance again—on our own terms, but with respect for the good that the world has to offer. Next comes the enthralling chapter called, "Who's Really a Catholic?," wherein everyone tries to decide what Vatican II means and just how much Church-world dialogue and contact there ought to be. That's about it. You'll have to read the book for the exciting details. Take my word for it, you'll love it.

<sup>1</sup> I capitalize the word "Church" in this book because I use it in two senses that I think call for capitalization:

(1) in the sense of a title with the words "Roman Catholic" missing, as in the proper name, Roman Catholic Church; (2) in the sense of an abstract entity or set of relationships that exists, in whatever form, to symbolize the community of believers who see themselves, however described or defined, as the followers of Jesus Christ and seekers after the Gospels' Kingdom of God.

## INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL FOCUS

I couldn't tell the story of the Church-world relationship without some reference to what was going on *within* the Church. So, there is much here that has to do with "internal affairs" only. Actually, until we get to Vatican II, we the Church don't really tackle head-on the issue of our relationship with the world. We either assume the world will go away and leave us alone or that we will dominate it with threats and denunciations or that we will just glide along in partnership with the world. It isn't until Vatican II that we the Church say, "Listen up, people! We've got to face this issue. The world isn't going away. We've gotten the internal issues satisfactorily argued about and defined to the nth degree. We know which labels to put on each other, who's orthodox and who's not, so now let's figure out how we bring the gospel into play in the Church-world dance."

Vatican II itself, as is now obvious, had an impact not only on the Church-world relationship, but on our own quest to understand and define ourselves aside and apart from the world. Thus, one can never really get away from internal affairs while exploring the Church-world relationship. However, in this book, there are certain internal matters about which the reader might want to know more and upon which I do not focus much attention. For example, while I do touch on the subject, I don't explore in much detail the history of the liturgy, even though an historical understanding of the liturgy is vital to understanding who we are as Church in the Church-world relationship. I don't discuss miraculous events or stories of the saints. And while I couldn't ignore the papacy in a book on Church-world interactions, I don't believe that the history of the Church is the same thing as a history of the popes. Nor do I enter beyond a superficial way into the realm of spiritual devotions. For instance, I don't talk about the apparitions of the Virgin Mary, or how the First Friday and First Saturday observances got started, or discuss petitions to have Padre Pio or Mother Teresa canonized.

## KNOW YOUR AUTHOR

Since so many people today are playing "Who's Really a Catholic?"—with such dreadful seriousness—perhaps I should say more about my own perspective on today's Church-world relationship. First, I don't particularly care for the world's values. For example, I can't stand to watch the average TV show. In 1998 a popular show called *Seinfeld* went off the air, and I didn't even know who Mr. Seinfeld was. To show how out of touch with the world's popular culture I am, when Princess Di and her lover, Dodi, died in 1997, I committed the unpardonable offense of asking if Dodi was the Princess's grandmother. ("Dodi" sounded like a grandmother's name to me.) Yet, as turned off as I am by the world's pursuit of icons, I do have my own saints and heroes who have come from the world rather than from the Church. Einstein, Gandhi, Churchill and Jung, for example.

I was raised in the pre-Vatican II Church and had to learn how to be "updated" like everyone else of my generation. As with Churchill's observation about Russia, the post-Vatican II Church is for me something of "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." But so be it. I prefer mystery stories to *Mechanics Illustrated*.

Yet, I do not believe that because I am in touch with a mystery, that I am confused<sup>2</sup> about where we have been and where we are going. I believe that as we the Church have marched forward on our two-millennium (and now three-millennium) pilgrimage into the post-Vatican II era, we have not been engaged, as some would conceive of it, in a quest for the brave, new world. As always, and more than ever, we are still called to be a "people set apart" (cf. 1 Peter 2:9) from the world and its ways.

Nothing I say as a criticism of the Church in the pages that follow is intended to suggest that I wish we would do away with the Church and merge with the world. Nor am I suggesting that sin is a thing of the past. The great error of the world today, as it has embraced the New Age gospel and the cult of the victimized, narcissistic self, is to suppose that Nature, undisturbed by human beings, is benign, loving and wonderful. I don't believe that. There is good and there is evil, and both exist in our world today. An historical critique of the Church's errors does not imply that I buy into the world's values or that I am recommending abolishing the Church's historic mission of building a kingdom different from that of the world.

## INTRODUCING THE EARLY CHURCH

**IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT** that you are living in the ancient city of Ephesus in today's Turkey, about the year A.D. 95. In your childhood you were baptized into the new Christian faith, and you are now struggling to live that faith in the face of opposition from your friends and threats of arrest by the authorities. The local police are suspicious of you and your family because you will not participate in the official Roman religion, which is based on worship of the emperor. The man who is emperor now, Domitian, has decreed that he is to be called "Our Lord and our God" by his subjects, but you and your family refuse to use this title.

You, your family and other Christians in Ephesus, make up a small minority of the population, less than five percent. You meet frequently in each others' homes to pray together and to study writings which are carried to Ephesus by Christian teachers who travel back and forth across the Empire, from Jerusalem to Rome. On "the day named for the sun," you gather and worship together by breaking bread in the name of and in memory of Jesus Christ. You believe that Jesus was the Son of God, and that he died for your sins and rose from the dead to become Lord of the universe.

### CHURCH AUTHORITY AFTER THE APOSTLES

Aside from the scorn of the non-Christian townspeople and the constant threat of being arrested for practicing your faith, you also are concerned about how your little *ekklesia* (Greek, "assembly" or "church") is to be run and organized. Your parents and other founders of your local Church are getting up in years. They never knew Jesus personally. Instead, they knew a man named Paul, who traveled to Ephesus and instructed them in the faith. Paul had known apostles like Peter as well as other direct disciples of Jesus. But Paul and Peter are dead, and thus you can't rely on the guidance of such men. Some members of your Church urge you to compromise with the Romans by performing the rituals of the state religion—burning incense to images of the

<sup>2</sup> A mystery is not a phenomenon that leads to confusion; instead, it leads to a deeper awareness of one's own inability to know perfectly that which inspires the sense of mystery. Much of the confusion in the Church today stems from people's unwillingness to face the challenge that contacting a mystery brings with it.

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Emperor, for example. Others are opposed to this, arguing that no compromise is possible.

How are you and your fellow Christians going to resolve this issue and others like it? It's bad enough having to worry about whether the authorities are even going to allow you to be a Christian, without also having to contend with controversy<sup>1</sup> within the body of believers. Gradually a solution begins to present itself. One thing you and the other Christians in Ephesus agree on is the need to stay in close touch with those who authentically represent what Jesus taught. Thus, you always have respected the writings of Paul, for example, and other writings about Jesus' life written down by men who knew Jesus personally or who studied with one of his apostles. This respect for authentic teaching is at the core of what you believe. You don't feel comfortable branching out on your own into doctrines and theories about Jesus that are not taught by authoritative representatives of the "Good News."

As a result, you and the other Christians in town have agreed to submit to the leadership of a man whom you have chosen and designated as your *episkopos*, or bishop. He is someone whose reputation for authentic faith in Jesus is well respected. The congregation in turn has chosen assistants to help the bishop guide the Church and teach the faith. Some of these assistants are named *presbiteros* or priest, and others *diakonos* or deacon. The priests administer the all-important rite of initiation called Baptism, especially in outlying areas that are too far from town for the bishop to visit. The deacons assist the bishop in practical matters, such as collecting money from the faithful and distributing it to widows in the Church.

### WHAT DOES 'CHURCH' MEAN TO YOU?

But there is more to your understanding of "Church" than just the community of Christians in Ephesus. You and your fellow believers consider yourselves part of a universal body. You regularly offer hospitality to Christians who travel through town, and eagerly listen to their account of how the faith is being practiced in other cities. You give a great deal of weight to the teachings of bishops who reside in places where the Christian faith is strongly rooted—especially the cities of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome. These four cities are regarded by Christians everywhere as "Mother Churches" of the Empire. The bishops of these cities often write letters to smaller Churches, in order to encourage the faithful and to explain fine points of doctrine. Just last week, for example, your bishop in Ephesus read your congregation a letter written by Bishop Clement of Rome. Along with the letters of Paul and the Gospel stories about Jesus, the letters written by bishops from the Mother Churches of the Empire help you to grow in knowledge of your faith.

You first came to understand this faith from your parents, who taught you the key Christian doctrines which they had learned from Paul. These key doctrines are now capsuled in the form of questions asked of people who are

preparing for Baptism. Thus when people who have been studying the faith, who are called *catechumens*,<sup>1</sup> present themselves for Baptism, they must first give a public answer to such questions as the following:

Do you believe in God the Father almighty?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Do you believe that the Son of God was born by the Spirit and power of God the Father made flesh in Mary's womb and born of her?

Do you believe that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, that he died, that on the third day he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, that he sat down at the right hand of God the Father and will come to judge the living and the dead?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and in holy Church?

When the catechumens satisfactorily answer these questions in the presence of the entire congregation, they are considered ready to be baptized. Baptism usually takes place early in the morning on Easter<sup>2</sup> but exceptions are made for people who are sick, elderly or dying, and thus baptisms are performed throughout the rest of the year as well. Young children and infants who cannot answer questions about their knowledge of the faith are baptized with their parents, who answer the questions for them.

Once catechumens have been baptized, they are permitted to participate fully in the congregation's worship services. For example, they are now allowed to recite the Our Father with the congregation and to eat the bread of the *Eucharist*. The Eucharist, a word which in Greek means "thanksgiving," is the symbolic ritual by which Christians most deeply sense and share the ongoing presence of the Lord Jesus among themselves because the bread and wine have become His Body and Blood. Many of the sermons given in your Church by traveling Christian teachers stress the importance of the Eucharist and emphasize the proper decorum which Christians are to observe when participating in the Eucharistic service.

### CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: THE CHURCH'S SELF-IMAGE

This brief sketch gives us a taste of what life was like for Christians in the days of the early Church shortly after the age of the apostles. From our imaginary visit, we have learned what was important to the early Christians: such things as leadership and teaching authority, forming loving relationships in a committed community, teaching one another what the gospel means, practicing one's faith under the threat of persecution. All of these concerns had to do with the issue of *Christian identity*, or with the Church's self-image. For the

<sup>1</sup> The catechumenate becomes a structured institution beginning in the second century.

<sup>2</sup> Before the fourth century, Easter was not universally reserved as the time for Baptism.

early Christians it was crucial to answer the question, "What is the Church, and how does a Christian live the gospel in the world?"

Of course, these are still crucial questions. In our own day, for example, Pope John Paul II has written that Vatican II can be thought of as a "question" which the Holy Spirit was asking the Church. The question is, "Church, who are you and what do you say of yourself?" This is a question which we will constantly be asking ourselves as we study Church history. For those of us living two thousand years after Jesus, answering this question usually does not involve a life-or-death decision, as often was the case for the early Christians.

## THE AGE OF PERSECUTION

Living in the Roman Empire as a Christian during the last decades of the first century and until about the year A.D. 311 was a dangerous enterprise. As early as A.D. 64, when the Emperor Nero covered Christians with pitch

and then burned them alive as human torches to light the streets of Rome, followers of Jesus were engaged in a deadly serious effort to survive in a world that considered them dangerous to the Empire and the human race.

Christians were despised principally because they refused to accept Caesar as the supreme authority over their lives. Instead, they proclaimed their allegiance to an obscure Jewish rabbi named Jesus, about whom most people knew nothing, and who was put to death in the Roman province of Judea for allegedly trying to become "king of the Jews." Thus, Christians, in addition to practicing a religion that was offensive to the Romans, were looked upon as traitors to the state for following someone who had tried to usurp Roman authority. Christians were also said to have been "atheists," for not worshipping the pagan gods, and they were regarded as anti-social for avoiding civil rituals, theater, games, etc.

The persecutions ebbed and flowed in intensity until A.D. 311. Until that time some emperors didn't concern themselves about the Christians, believing them to be harmless fanatics. Other emperors, however, rightly concluded that the quickly spreading new faith was a serious threat to imperial control of the State religion. Some emperors tried to eradicate Christianity root and branch. Emperor Trajan (99-117), for example, made it illegal just to be a Christian. He had Christians transported to Rome where they were taken into the packed Circus Maximus and torn apart and eaten by wild animals.

Within a century, however, there were getting to be too many Christians to kill in this way, and so Emperor Severus (197-211) made it illegal to *convert* to Christianity. He hoped that the Church would die out for lack of new members. But this didn't work either. Emperor Decius (249-251) ordered all people in the Empire to sacrifice publicly to the Roman gods. Some Christians, even some bishops, renounced their faith and complied with the emperor's decree. Many other Christians remained faithful, earning the title *martyrs* ("witnesses"), by dying for the faith. Still others, called *confessors*, spoke out heroically for the faith, but were not put to death.

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The height of the persecutions was reached under Emperor Diocletian (284-305). He destroyed churches, burned Bibles and other sacred books, and tortured and executed as many bishops and priests as he could get his hands on. Things got so bad that many Christians fled to deserts or other isolated places, living by themselves in caves or in small communities away from the world. Many of these communities continued to flourish after Christianity became respectable. This type of life came to be called *monasticism*, which is the living of Christian life away from the world and focusing on God alone. (Monasticism was not just a response to persecution. See page 34 ff.)

## WHY THE CHURCH SURVIVED AND FLOURISHED

Finally, the persecutions stopped. In A.D. 311, Emperor Galerius issued an edict tolerating the Christians. Why did Galerius do this? For several reasons. First of all, it had become obvious to the Roman authorities that persecution was counterproductive. Instead of squelching the Christians, persecution made them stronger. As the Christian writer, Tertullian (160-225), observed, "The blood of the martyrs is seed for the Church."

Second, by Galerius' time the Roman Empire was in serious trouble. It had spread itself too thin, was internally corrupt, constantly operated at an economic deficit, and was besieged on all its frontiers by barbarian peoples who wanted to plunder its riches. Thus it simply no longer made sense to persecute Christians, especially when more and more Roman citizens were becoming Christians. Rome needed all the talent it could get to solve its problems.

But the principal reason why the persecutions stopped was that Christianity had won the minds and hearts of great numbers of people to the gospel. Aside from the appeal of the gospel message itself, the *life-style* of Christians played an important role in attracting converts. The biblical account in Acts reflects the actual historical situation in many places: prayer, study, discipline, sharing of possessions and communal service. "[N]one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold" (Acts 4:32, 34).

A contemporary historian described this Christian life-style by writing, "See how these Christians love one another!" As the Romans compared their own deteriorating morality, with its tolerance of abortion, infanticide, sexual perversity and violence, to that of the Christians, it became obvious that the Christians actually practiced the ethical conduct that Roman philosophy only preached.

At first it was principally the poorer classes and slaves who converted to Christianity, largely because in the Gospels Jesus openly sided with the poor, downtrodden and oppressed. In Luke's Gospel, for example, Jesus is depicted as beginning his public ministry in order "to bring glad tidings to the poor"

(Luke 4:18). The preached gospel appealed to the poor, especially in a society marked by discrimination, injustice and economic oppression.

Eventually, however, more members of the upper classes were won to the gospel. On occasion, rumors circulated that this or that emperor was secretly a Christian. It was often even less of a secret that emperors' wives or daughters attended Christian meetings. During periods of lull in the persecutions, some Roman senators converted to Christianity. Noted intellectuals began to espouse Christian doctrine. With all of this happening, Christianity's success was inevitable.

## AN EMPEROR BECOMES CHRISTIAN

The greatest boost to Christian fortunes took place beginning in the year A.D. 312, when Emperor Constantine defeated his rival to the imperial throne in the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The night before the battle, Constantine had a dream in which he saw a Christian symbol and heard the words, "By this, conquer." He inscribed the symbol, a sort of bent cross known as the *labarum*, on his soldiers' shields, and prevailed in battle. From that time on, with Constantine's enthusiastic support, Christianity became the favored religion of the Empire. It was not until A.D. 380, however, under Emperor Theodosius, that Christianity became the "official" religion of the Empire.

## HOW CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION AFFECTED CHURCH AUTHORITY

Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 (he was not actually baptized until his death in 337) brought mixed blessings to the Church. Although Christians could now practice their faith openly, they lost much of the independence they had possessed in earlier times when they had to fend for themselves. For the first time, the Church had to deal with the issues of political power and wealth. As we shall see, the Church did not always resolve such issues wisely. Then, too, Constantine once described himself as "a bishop of God," and on several occasions issued orders to the actual bishops as if they were his underlings. Naturally, many of the bishops resisted Constantine's efforts to control the Church. Some bishops were more successful in doing this than others.

In the Eastern half of the Empire (see Focus 1, page 8), where Constantine had moved his capital, and where he could keep a closer eye on the Eastern bishops, the Church gradually came more and more under the thumb of the imperial bureaucracy. In the Western Church, on the other hand, where Roman law and order were deteriorating rapidly, and where Constantine wasn't present to control things, bishops remained relatively independent from imperial control. Gradually, the bishops of Rome (in place of the emperors)

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came to be seen as preservers of the old *Pax Romana*, or "Roman Peace." These bishops of Rome assumed more and more control over the Western Church's institutional structure.

Although all bishops in the early Church were known as *pappas*, the Greek word for "Daddy," it was the bishops of Rome who gradually came to bear this name exclusively, thereby becoming known as "popes." In the East, however, in Constantine's new capital city of Constantinople, the *patriarchs* (Greek and Latin = "Father"), or chief bishops of the capital, saw themselves as heads of their own Churches, independent from the pope's authority.

The question of the pope's authority versus that of the Eastern bishops was never answered to everyone's satisfaction, as we shall see later in our study of Church history. The main point to remember for the moment is that in the East, Church authority came more and more under State control, while in the West the opposite was taking place, with the popes in Rome stepping into a leadership vacuum and asserting more and more authority over both the Church and Western society. Bishops such as Ambrose of Milan (339-97) successfully defied imperial authority.

## OTHER CHANGES IN THE CHURCH AFTER CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION

Before Constantine, the differences between clergy and laity in the Church were not as pronounced as after his conversion.<sup>1</sup> Many priests and bishops before Constantine's reign did not serve the Church full-time, but worked for a living in other occupations to support themselves. Most of them were married men with families. They dressed like everyone else and lived in the same fashion as other Christians.

With Constantine, however, the clergy, being among the most educated and skilled people in the empire, were drawn into the service of the State. They were given titles like "most illustrious," the forerunner of today's "reverend" or "excellency." They began to dress like imperial officials. For example, the bishop's tall, cylindrical hat, or *miter*, was patterned after the hats worn by imperial officials, who thought that by wearing tall hats they "stood above" everyone else.

This process by which the clergy came to be seen as separate and implicitly of more importance than the laity, had a tremendous impact on how the Church thought of itself. We could perhaps conceive of the first-century Church as a closely knit family, which we can imagine holding hands together and standing in a circle. After Constantine, the Church came to be thought of as a pyramid, with popes, bishops, priests, and eventually all sorts of other ranks, placed at the top, and the laity placed at the bottom. After Constantine's con-

<sup>1</sup> A work called *Apostolic Tradition*, written about the year 215, describes in great detail the differences between the various ranks of the clergy.

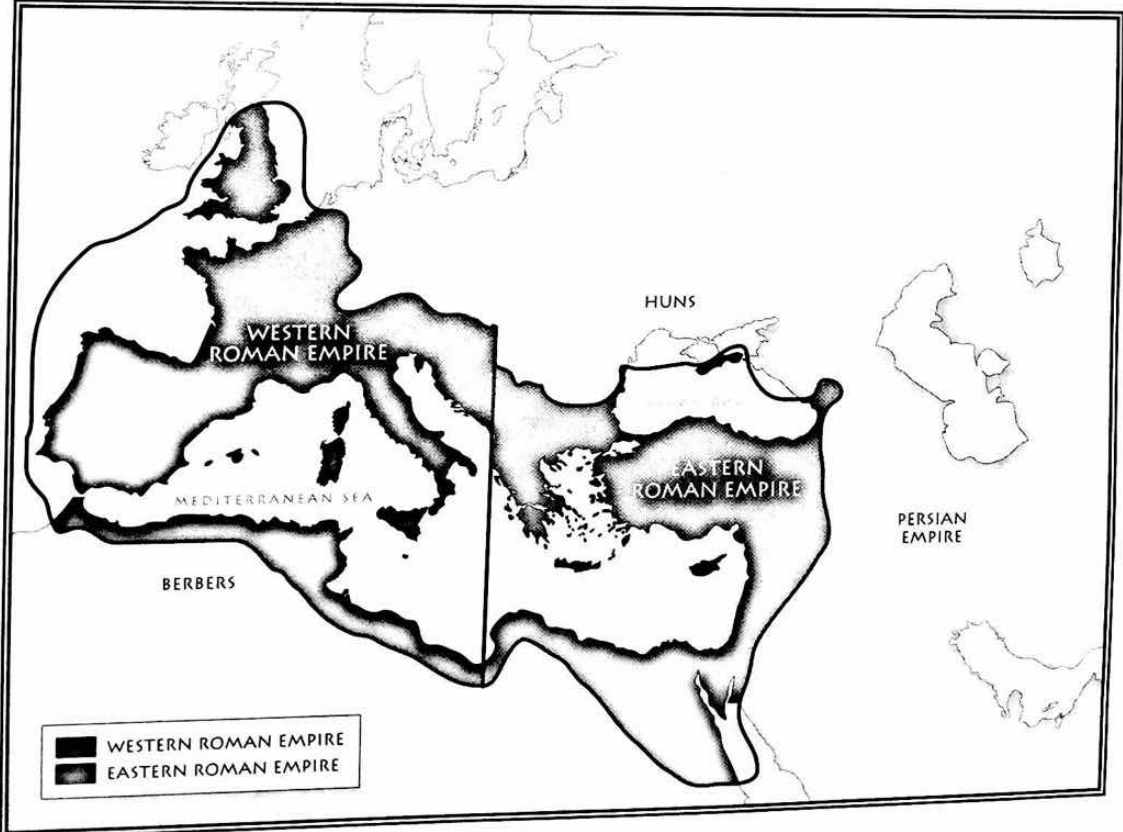
version, the Church's identity—its self-image—was changed drastically. This change in the Church's self-image is something we will notice often in our study of Church history. In actuality, there is no one, fixed image of what the Church is. The Church, by its very nature, constantly changes. The question is, does our changing self-image as Church match the gospel's vision of Church, or is it at odds with that vision? In the pages ahead, we will return often to this theme of how the Church's image of itself changed in response to changes in the world in which the Church lived.

**FOCUS 1**

**THE EARLY CHURCH:  
WHERE GEOGRAPHY MADE HISTORY**

In the map at right, notice the line separating the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire. This line corresponds roughly to the division of the Empire made by Emperor Diocletian in the year 286. The dividing line also marks off the two different "worlds" of the early Church. The Eastern Church, centered in Constantinople, was largely Greek in language and thought. The Western Church, centered in Rome, was principally Latin in orientation. This meant that Eastern Christians tended to approach their faith more conceptually, wanting to understand abstract doctrines like the Trinity. Western Christians tended to be more *practical*, focusing on issues like Church authority and organization. As time went on, the gap between East and West widened, and each side of the Christian world tended to look down its nose at the other. Greeks often spoke of the Latins as "superficial" and "ignorant," while some Latins thought of the Greeks as "effeminate" and "daydreamers." We will follow closely in the pages ahead this difference in outlook between East and West and observe how it eventually led to a major *schism*, or split, between the two halves of the Church.

WESTERN AND EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE, AD 286



INTRODUCING THE EARLY CHURCH



## FOCUS 2

## WHEN DID THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH BEGIN?

It would be erroneous to think of the Roman Catholic Church as existing in the year A.D. 30 exactly as it is today. Obviously there was no Vatican, no College of Cardinals, no Confession to a priest inside a dark box, until much later in the Church's history. The formation of the Roman Catholic Church into the institution we have today has been a slow, evolving process.

Still, the early Christians did look upon themselves as "Catholic." The name *Catholic Church* was first used, so far as we know, about the year 105 by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch. And one early martyr, Pionius, described himself as a Christian who belonged to the Catholic Church. Early Christian writers used the word *Catholic* to refer to the universal character of the Church ("catholic" means "universal"). They also used it to refer to the developing institution which preserved the authentic gospel in the face of both persecution and heresy.

As this task of preserving the gospel in the West came increasingly to be supervised by the bishops of Rome, it also became increasingly accurate to speak of the Western Church as Roman Catholic. This Mother Church in Rome attempted to unite the various local Churches throughout the Empire into a unified body of believers. The early Western Church was both Roman and Catholic. But as we shall see in Chapter Three, the meaning of the words *Roman* and *Catholic* would change as the Church faced new challenges.

## THE EARLY CHURCH DEFINES ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

**MARY ANN DONALDSON** walks toward her CCD classroom lost in thought. "These tenth-graders ask the *darndest* questions. After last week's class on marriage and sexuality, I felt lucky just to have gotten home in one piece! Surely this week will be easier. After all, I'd much rather tell these little know-it-alls about the Profession of Faith than explain to them why pre-marital sex is a sin."

Mary Ann opens the door to her classroom to find the usual chaotic scene—thirty teenagers draped over desks, chasing each other around the classroom or otherwise demonstrating that religious education was the farthest thing from their minds. "Good evening, everyone," Mary Ann shouts. After a few half-hearted responses of, "Good evening, Mrs. Donaldson," the class comes to a state of semi-order. Mary Ann leads the class in prayer and a period of silent meditation, and then announces, "Tonight we're going to discuss the Profession of Faith. Who wants to tell me what it is?"

"That's that thing we say after the sermon," Tommy Riordan answers.

"Very good," Mary Ann says. "And just to show you that I do my homework, too, I've written the whole 'thing,' as Tommy calls it, on this piece of poster paper."

Mary Ann attaches to the blackboard her handwritten version of the Profession of Faith which she has copied from the Sunday missalette. "OK," she says to the class, "let's go over each line together, and then talk about what it means." The class reads the Profession of Faith out loud, and then Mary Ann leads a discussion. Roseanne Medina raises her hand. "What is this 'One in being with the Father' stuff all about? Does that mean Jesus and the Father are the same?"

"Well, no, they're not the *same*, Roseanne, but they are both divine."

Judy Walsh quits snapping her chewing gum long enough to say, "That doesn't make sense! If the Father 'begot' Jesus, than Jesus can't be God just like the Father is." "That's right," Eddie Lynskey says. "How can Jesus and the Father both be God at the same time?"

"Well, it's hard for us to understand," Mary Ann answers half-heartedly. "We just have to accept some things on faith."

The class is not impressed with her answer. Bobby Hoffstedler, the noted chess whiz and math genius, adjusts his glasses and asks, "How do we know that Jesus was God. Mrs. Donaldson? Does it say anywhere in the Bible, Jesus Christ is God' or 'Jesus Christ is one in being with the Father'?"

"Yeah," half the class replies. "Does it?"

Mary Ann wishes she had signed up for aerobics class as she had originally planned instead of accepting Father Growers' invitation to teach CCD.

"Well, no. I don't think it specifically says anywhere in the Bible 'Jesus is God' or that he was one in being with the Father. That's why we have the Profession of Faith."

Rudy Johnson, the two-hundred-pound fullback, asks, "Well, why should we believe *that*?"

The class erupts in chaos. "Yeah, how do we know Jesus was God? Maybe Jesus was just like any other man. And how'd we get the Profession of Faith in the first place?"

Mary Ann looks hopefully at the clock and thinks, "How did I ever get myself into this mess!" Aloud she announces, "All right, all right, we'll talk about all those things next week. But time is up for tonight."

What will Mary Ann do? Her task is not unlike that of her predecessors in faith who lived in the first three centuries of the early Church. Like Mary Ann, today's imagined religious education teacher, they, too, believed that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Like her, they had a lot of beliefs which they couldn't explain and perhaps some which seemed hazy or unclear to them.

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION QUESTIONS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

It was the special task of the Christians living in the first three centuries to answer the very questions which Mary Ann's students are asking today; such questions as, "Was Jesus truly God? Wasn't he perhaps 'less of a God' than the Father? Isn't it possible that the Father just gave Jesus some share of his divinity at a later point in Jesus' life, such as when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan?" And even if Jesus was truly God, surely he wasn't an actual human being like all the rest of us, was he? Isn't it possible that he just looked and acted human?"

The early Church's answer to such questions was of vital importance to the way in which Christianity was to develop. Was Christianity truly the unique religion it proclaimed itself to be in which the eternal God entered fully into the human condition by becoming a man in the person of Jesus? Or was Christianity just another version of the ancient religious myths, about which people in the Roman Empire had speculated for centuries.

<sup>1</sup>An early heresy, *Adoptionism*, taught this doctrine.

## GNOSTICISM: THE CHURCH CONFRONTS HERESY

Consider, for example, the Gnostics. The Gnostics were people who believed that they possessed a special version of secret knowledge about life (Greek *gnosis*, "knowledge") reserved only for an elite few. There were many varieties of Gnostics. Some of them borrowed bits and pieces of their beliefs from Judaism but they distorted Judaism. They taught that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was in actuality an evil angel who created the earth and human beings.

The Gnostics believed that spiritual realities were of more value than earthly realities. For example, they mistrusted the human body, marriage and all material creation. Many Gnostics acted like some of the hippies did in the 1960's, ignoring moral values and living in communes where group sex was practiced and marriage was scorned as foolish. Other Gnostics, however, were strictly ascetical, remaining celibate for reasons of "purity," and adhering to strict dietary rules so as not to cloud their spiritual perception.

Gnosticism's principal threat to the gospel was its teaching that God had not really become a human being in the person of Jesus. The Gnostics taught either that Jesus was simply a highly enlightened man or that he was an angel or spiritual messenger who only *appeared* to be a man. The latter teaching was the heresy of *docetism*, which comes from the Greek word for "appear." The bishops of the early Church realized the danger which Gnosticism presented and confronted it.

The most skillful foe of Gnosticism was Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons in southern France. Irenaeus lived from about the year 130 to about 200 and wrote a treatise called *Against Heresies*. The thrust of Irenaeus's work was to preserve the main doctrine of Christianity—namely, that God actually had become a man in the person of Jesus. Jesus was not an angel who merely *appeared* to be a man. Jesus truly was a human being while at the same time divine. The eternal Word, the Son of God, really had become human, and really did live among people on earth.

Through the work of bishops like Irenaeus, Gnosticism as such began to diminish in importance. By the year 200 or so, most Christians were capable of distinguishing between Jesus as a divine messenger or angel, as the Gnostics taught, and Jesus as the man who was divine, as Christianity taught. But questions about the nature of Jesus' divinity did not go away. Many people now wondered whether Jesus was of "equal divinity" to the Father. In other words, some Christians asked, was Jesus *fully* divine?

## ARIANISM AND THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

Confusion about Jesus' relationship to the Father was especially prominent in the East. In the early fourth century, an Egyptian priest named Arius taught that the Son of God was inferior to the Father. Arius was a skilled preacher

and gained much support for his doctrine, even among bishops. A great controversy began to rage, known to us today as the Arian controversy. Arius's doctrine is known as *Arianism*, which is the belief that the Son of God was created in time and is inferior in his divinity to the Father. The debate between Arian and non-Arian bishops became so heated that Emperor Constantine himself found it necessary to intervene.

In the year 325, the Emperor convened a council at Nicea, located in today's Turkey, south of Constantinople's capital of Constantinople (named Istanbul today). Some 318 bishops came to the Council of Nicea, but only five of them were Western bishops. By and large, it was still Eastern bishops who were involved in the great theological debates, although of course it was much easier for Eastern bishops to travel to Nicea than it was for Western bishops. The leading light at the Council was a young deacon from Alexandria named Athanasius. Athanasius argued that it would be impossible to overcome Arianism unless the Council arrived at a formula, or *creed*, which defined just what the relationship was between the Son and the Father. Athanasius believed that truths in the gospel sometimes need further explanation in order to be made clearer. He thus proposed using a Greek word (see Focus 3, page 17) not found in Scripture in order to make it clear what Christians believed about the relationship between Father and Son.

That word is translated in today's Profession of Faith as "one in being," so that the Son is said to be of equal divinity with the Father. To make this point clearer, the bishops at the Council of Nicea, in writing their *Nicene Creed*, added that the Son of God is "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, begotten, not made." In other words, the bishops emphasized that the eternal, pre-existing Son was not created in time as the Arians taught, but had always co-existed with the Father.

## ENTER THE HOLY SPIRIT

Even though Emperor Constantine approved the Nicene Creed and proclaimed it to be the correct statement of Christian doctrine, not everyone agreed with it. In fact, it would be accurate to say that during most of the fourth century, Arianism was often the dominant viewpoint. It took fifty years or so after the Council of Nicea before the Nicene Creed was fully accepted as orthodox doctrine. Even then, some bishops and priests found something of a loophole in the Nicene Creed because it had not said much of anything about the Holy Spirit, other than the bland assertion, "We believe in the Holy Spirit."

Some of these "closet Arians," we could call them, began to say the same things about the Holy Spirit that it had once been popular to say about Jesus. They said that the Holy Spirit was merely a divine messenger. Athanasius, now the Bishop of Alexandria, rejected this doctrine too, teaching that the Holy Spirit was fully and eternally God.

But it was really three other Christian thinkers in the East who helped Christians better understand the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. These three thinkers were Bishop Basil of Caesarea (known today as "Basil the Great"), Basil's brother, Bishop Gregory of Nyssa, and a monk named Gregory of Nazianzus. All three men flourished in the second half of the fourth century. Because they lived in the Roman province of Cappadocia (today's Turkey, between the Mediterranean and Black Sea), they are commonly known in Church history as "the Cappadocians."

The great contribution of the Cappadocians was to define words precisely and apply those words to that most difficult to comprehend of all Christian doctrines—the Trinity. The Cappadocians cleared away a lot of the confusion surrounding the philosophical concepts of "person," "substance" and "nature," and showed that the Trinity could be understood as three divine persons in one divine substance. Contrary to what others were teaching, God did not have three different natures, but only one nature, a divine nature. Yet this divine nature was shared by three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Despite what Athanasius and the Cappadocians taught, many bishops disagreed about the Holy Spirit. As a result about one hundred fifty bishops, all from the East, met in Constantinople in the year 381 to settle their differences over the Holy Spirit. They drafted another creed. This "Creed of Constantinople" is virtually identical to the Profession of Faith that we have today.<sup>2</sup> The bishops at the Council of Constantinople agreed completely with the Nicene Creed, but they spoke more fully about the Holy Spirit than had the bishops at Nicea, fifty-six years earlier.

They called the Spirit "the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshiped and glorified, Who spoke through the prophets. Notice that the bishops did not say, "Who proceeds from the Father and the Son..." as we have it today in the Roman Catholic liturgy. As we shall see, these words were added later by the Western Church and led to an angry debate between Eastern and Western theologians.

## ANOTHER CONTROVERSY: 'MOTHER OF GOD' OR 'MOTHER OF JESUS'

One would have thought that two great councils and two creeds would have settled the doctrinal issues in the early Church. Such was not the case. A new

<sup>2</sup> Hence it is technically incorrect to refer to the Creed of the Mass as "The Nicene Creed." But it is much easier to pronounce Nicene than Constantinopolitan!

controversy now arose; this one even more heated than the Arian controversy had been. It started about the year 430 when Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople disapproved of the title, "Mother of God," as applied to the Virgin Mary. Nestorius reasoned that if Christians were to call Mary Mother of God, then Jesus would not be thought of as truly human. Nestorius wanted Mary to be called simply Mother of Christ. There was a problem with this. As long as anyone could remember, Mary had been called Mother of God, and the Christians in Constantinople were angry that Bishop Nestorius was trying to change their faith.

Nestorius had overlooked the fact that Christian doctrine is found within the day-to-day life of the Church and its worship as much as it is in the lofty speculations of theologians. Nestorius did not give credit to what Vatican II would later call the *sensus fidei*, or "intuitive sense of the faith" possessed by ordinary believers, who in their prayer, devotions and day-to-day faith arrive at theological truths just as certainly as do bishops and popes. The faithful had long called Mary Mother of God, and it was offensive to them to have intellectuals in the hierarchy suddenly change this ancient title. Because Nestorius was not sensitive to this *sensus fidei*, he set off another bitter conflict—calling for yet another council.

The Council of Ephesus met in the year 431. It was not actually concerned with Mary, but with the person of Jesus. The debate over Mary's title was simply the starting point for the "real" debate. The real debate was about the person of Jesus. Was Jesus human or divine, or both? The Council of Ephesus endorsed Mary's title as Mother of God. It also said that Jesus had both a divine and human nature joined together in one person. Yet, because the two sides at Ephesus were so opposed to each other, the bishops did not write a creed to express in official language what they thought about Jesus' divine and human nature. A later council would do that.

## THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON

The last of the four great councils of the early Church met in the year 451 in Chalcedon (directly across a narrow sea channel separating the city from Constantinople). The purpose of the council was to issue a creed that would settle matters debated at the Council of Ephesus, twenty years before. More than five hundred bishops attended, including a delegation from the West. These westerners brought with them a theological treatise written by the bishop of Rome, the *Tome*, or "great book," of Pope Leo the Great (440-461).

Pope Leo was a highly skilled theologian in his own right. He sent his *Tome* to Chalcedon as an official statement of doctrine to be adopted by all the bishops in attendance. In other words, Leo proclaimed himself the spiritual leader of the bishops of the Eastern Church as well as of the Western Church. While not all the bishops at Chalcedon agreed that Leo's word was supreme, the majority at the Council nonetheless enthusiastically endorsed Leo's *Tome*, exclaiming, "In Leo, Peter has spoken!"

The Council of Chalcedon followed both what the Council of Ephesus had

resolved and what Leo had written in his *Tome*. The bishops at the council said that in Jesus the Son of God, two natures, a human nature and a divine nature, were united in one person. Jesus was thus formally declared by the Church to have been both fully human and fully divine.

After these many years of struggle, the early Church had finally achieved an authoritative doctrinal statement about the person of Jesus. The Creed of Chalcedon was accepted by the majority of Christians in both East and West. Yet, there were, and still are today, Christians who do not honor the Creed of Chalcedon. Such people insisted that Jesus had only a divine nature and not an authentic human nature. They were called *Monophysites* (from the Greek for "one nature"). Yet, the majority Christian position had become firmly accepted. The early Church had now established, in words that were clear to all, the most basic Christian doctrine: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

### FOCUS 3

#### PHILOSOPHY IN THE SERVICE OF FAITH: 'HOMOIOUSIOS'

It would have made things easier if the bishops meeting at the Council of Nicea could simply have turned to a verse in the Bible and said to the Arian bishops, "See, it says right here that the Son of God is one in being with the Father and that the Son was not created in time but eternally begotten." The problem was, however, that the Bible doesn't use such words. What would you have done in such a situation?

Perhaps you would have done what Athanasius did, and argued for a creed which uses a word that clarifies what the Bible says about the Son's relationship to the Father. What word would you use? Since the bishops spoke and wrote in Greek, they had roughly three Greek words to consider in formulating the section of the Nicene Creed referring to the relationship between the Son and the Father. They could have said the Son was *homoiousios*, or *of like substance with* the Father, that the Son was *homoios*, or *like the Father*, or that the Son was *homoousios—of the same substance with the Father*.

In the end, the bishops chose the third alternative. This is a philosophical concept called *homoousios*. It is translated in today's Profession of Faith as "one in being with." No, it is not found in the Bible, but nowhere in the Bible is there a word which so precisely defines the core Christian doctrine of the Son's equal divinity to the Father. This was a case where philosophy came to the assistance of revelation, with the Holy Spirit continuing to clarify Church doctrine well after the Gospels were written.

**FOCUS 4**  
**THE POWER BEHIND THE COUNCILS:**  
**THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**  
**IN FORMULATING DOCTRINE**

Is it “historical” to talk about the Holy Spirit’s role in shaping the outcome of the great debates over Christian doctrine? “Let’s face it, you might say, ‘didn’t the bishops of the early Church often have political or personal interests in the outcome of these debates?’” For example, at the Council of Ephesus, Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, who was jealous of his rival, Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople, saw to it that Nestorius was condemned as “the new Judas.” Nestorius did not even have a chance to come to the council to defend his theological position. Is that the Holy Spirit at work? And weren’t the bishops at Nicea, a century earlier, influenced by the fact that Emperor Constantine’s personal theological advisor opposed Arianism?

Such questions are valid, but tend to overlook the way in which the bishops saw themselves undertaking doctrinal debate. The written remembrances of the bishops in attendance at the great councils show that they believed the Holy Spirit helped them make their decisions. The great councils of the early Church were not legislative assemblies like Congress or Parliament. Despite the human factors that may have influenced the decisions of the bishops, the councils were more than just debating societies. The historian is struck by “something more” than just religious argument going on at the councils. In the eyes of faith there is no better explanation for the extraordinary achievement of the great councils than the power of the Holy Spirit at work.

The bishops had a sense that they were trustworthy teachers of the Good News and therefore capable of identifying orthodox doctrine in the midst of controversy—even if that required using non-Scriptural terms like “nature” and “person.” The bishops spoke in the sense of Acts 15:28: “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and ours.”

**THE FALL OF ROME**  
**AND THE RISE OF THE**  
**WESTERN CHURCH**

**LET’S IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE** a Christian living in Ravenna, in northeastern Italy, about the year 410. Let’s say that your parents are both alive, that you are a young woman in your late teens, and that you have two brothers and two sisters. Your father is an official in the local government, and your mother is active in teaching other Christians to prepare for baptism. What are the principle concerns that you have as a Christian in this day and age? It has been some thirty years now (A.D. 380) since Emperor Theodosius declared Nicene Christianity<sup>1</sup> to be the official religion of the Empire, and so you have no hesitation about practicing your faith in public.

Yet, for some time you have heard your father speak with fear in his voice about the breakdown of law and order in Ravenna, and in the rest of Italy and the Empire as a whole. He has complained that the emperors and imperial officials are more interested in the cities of the East than they are in the birthplace of the Empire—Rome and the other cities of Italy. “No more do our Roman customs appeal to the imperial family,” he has lamented. “If it weren’t for our bishop and our Holy Father in Rome, there wouldn’t be anything left of the old ways.”

Your father senses that a great change is overtaking society, and since your Church is part of society, change is in the air for the Church as well. And then there is the other fear your father talks about—the marauding tribes of people from the North who are constantly battering at the gates of the Empire. Several young men in your Church have gone off to serve in the imperial army and have been killed in battle against strange peoples from distant lands. Like everyone else in your Church, you, too, wonder what is going to happen. Will these non-Christian “barbarians,” as they are being called, come to Ravenna and destroy your Church, as they are doing everywhere else?

One day your father returns home breathless and frightened. “Rome has

<sup>1</sup> That is, the version of Christian doctrine as set forth in the Creed of Constantinople in 381.

fallen!" he exclaims. "That horrid Visigoth, Alaric!<sup>2</sup> Everyone knew he would turn on the generals and, sure enough, he has."

"What does this mean, Father?" you ask, trying to hold back the tears. "Your father embraces you and says, 'It means, my dear one, that we must leave Ravenna. We must go south, to Sicily. It will be safer there, at least for the time being.'"

"Dear God!" your mother exclaims. "What will become of our Church? We have nearly forty people who are awaiting Baptism. Who will protect them? Will these savages kill every Christian in Italy?"

"I don't know," your father answers. "I just don't know."

The following morning, you and your family pack your belongings, leave your home and board a ship heading south for Sicily where your father has relatives, and where he hopes to begin work as a fisherman. You are sad to leave your friends behind, and your mother is even sadder to leave behind the little group of catechumens that she has been training. (As a woman, your mother probably was allowed to teach only other women.) What will become of your family? What will become of the Church that you are leaving behind?

.....

This imagined scene is not uncommon in fifth-century Italy. This is a time of turmoil and transition in the very land that once served as the impregnable fortress of the mighty Roman Empire. For nearly a thousand years the Romans maintained a civilization that rivaled anything the ancient world had seen.

Then it all began to unravel. Decay from within and attack from without gradually wore the Romans down. By the late fourth century, Rome was a shadow of its former greatness.

Already the emperors had moved their power base to the East, to Constantinople. There they hoped to preserve their once-dominant Latin empire in a land of Greek culture and language. As this process took place, the very concept of empire was changed forever. By the late fifth century, it was no longer accurate to refer to the "Roman" Empire, except out of nostalgic reminiscence.

As we shall discuss more fully in Chapter Six, a new Christian state was taking shape in the East, the Byzantine Empire, which would claim to be Rome's heir. Its capital, Constantinople, was said to be the Second Rome.<sup>3</sup>

## THE FALL OF ROME AND THE RISE OF THE WESTERN CHURCH

### THE WESTERN CHURCH DURING THE AGE OF BARBARIAN INVASION

What effect did all this have on Christians living in the West? Obviously, it affected them greatly. The Church is a human institution that lives in a human society. It was as impossible for the Western Church in the fourth and fifth centuries to avoid the effects of the Roman Empire's collapse, as it was for the Catholic Church in America in the days of the great Irish immigrations of the nineteenth century to remain the small, isolated, self-protective Church it had once been.

In both cases, what happened in society as a whole had tremendous effects on the path of Church history. Faith would say that the Holy Spirit always uses the human situation in which the Church finds itself and molds the Church to take on a new identity in order to meet new challenges. Let's see how this process occurred in the Western Church during the period from about the death of Emperor Constantine, to about the time of Pope Gregory the Great, who died in the year 604.

In the Church's first three centuries, the persecutions were the principal external force shaping the Church's self-image. In the next three centuries, the barbarian invasions made the Church reassess its identity. How would the Church react to the influx of an entirely new type of people into the Roman Empire? On the one hand, the barbarians threatened to destroy the very civilization in which the Church had come to life and flourish. On the other hand, the barbarians needed to hear the gospel and be converted by it just as urgently as did the citizens of the Empire.

The Western Church faced two questions: *First*, could it remain Roman, in the sense of preserving all that was good about the Empire, with its order, peace, stability, learning and culture? *Second*, how could the Church, as Roman, also make its appeal *catholic*, or universal, so that *all* peoples, even peoples who had no tradition of stability and order, would be attracted to the gospel? The answer was that the Church had to be both Roman and catholic (universal in its outreach) at the same time.

Thus, even more so than in the first three centuries, the Church had to become both "one" and "many." It had to stay rooted in its ancient Roman origins, and it had to reach out to strange, new peoples who knew nothing about the classical Roman heritage which the Church wanted to preserve. At this point in its history the Church reached another of those moments of crisis. The Church once again had to assess its self-image, and ask itself, "Church, who are you in this day and age?" In Chapter Five, we will see that the Church did not always give a gospel response to this question, particularly when it came to relating to the new barbarian kingdoms that had replaced the Roman emperors.

<sup>2</sup> Alaric was a mercenary who served the Roman army, but then betrayed his paymasters and sacked the city of Rome in A.D. 410.

<sup>3</sup> The "Third Rome" was Moscow with its new Caesars ("Czars"). It succeeded to Constantinople's place after the fall of that city to the Turks in 1453.

<sup>4</sup> For "West" and "East," see Focus 1, page 8.

For one thing, after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, many Christians assumed that Roman culture and Christian faith were virtually identical. For many people, to be Roman was to be Christian, and to be Christian was to be Roman.<sup>5</sup>

Now, all of a sudden, here were all these barbarians on the scene. What was the Church to do about such non-Roman people? Would the barbarians have to be turned into Romans before they could be baptized? Or could they have to speak Latin and dress, think and act like everyone else? Or could the Church somehow let them keep their tribal customs while at the same time admitting them into the Church on equal footing with everyone else?

These were thorny questions. Christianity does not come wrapped up in one "package." Had the Roman Christians confused their culture with their faith? Had they become Christian simply because Christianity was the official religion and practiced by the emperors? Was Church "unity" confused with social conformity? And what about "converting" the barbarians? Were they to be truly converted to the gospel, or simply brought into Roman life and told to accept the official religion? These were hard questions, and the Church did not always do such a good job answering them. But one thing was sure. The Church would be changed forever by its contact with the new, non-Roman peoples breaking across the frontiers of the Empire.

## NEW CHALLENGES IN AN AGE OF CHAOS

In the first three centuries the Church had to learn how to preach the gospel in a way that appealed to educated Romans. Now the Church had to learn how to preach the gospel in a way that would appeal to people who could neither read nor write and who had for centuries practiced crude forms of nature worship.<sup>6</sup> As the Church began to evangelize the barbarian peoples, it had to phrase the Gospel in less "intellectual" language. This was not a dialogue with educated Romans. The Church had to learn how to be more "earthy" in its approach to evangelization. We will see in a later chapter how this worked itself out, especially as we discuss worship and devotion in the medieval Church.

For the moment, consider just one example. Most of the barbarian peoples believed in some form of ancestor worship. The Church could not accept this belief. Yet, in its devotion to the saints, the Church found a means of accommodating the cult of ancestor worship to Christian belief and tradition. In this way, the gospel message was made comprehensible to people who had no other frame of reference by which to understand that message.

## THE FALL OF ROME AND THE RISE OF THE WESTERN CHURCH

### THE CHURCH AS PRESERVER OF ORDER AND STABILITY

The barbarian invasions and migrations brought the Church another challenge. By the year 489, a barbarian tribe known as the Ostrogoths had gained the ascendancy in Italy. There was really nothing left of Roman government. The old Western Empire was divided among various barbarian tribes who established new and autonomous kingdoms. In the East, the new Byzantine Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, managed to keep the ancient classical civilization intact. In the West, however, a new society and a new culture had come into existence. Previously, the Empire had provided order and served to unify society. Now there was only one institution left from Roman times which could provide the stability that the Empire had formerly provided, and that institution was the Church.

The Western Church from the late fifth century onward, increasingly took over from the defunct Empire the role of providing society with a stable base. The Church served to bring something of the ancient *Pax Romana* into a disintegrating society. Perhaps the best example of this took place during the papacy of Pope Leo the Great (440-461). A barbarian chieftain named Attila and his tribe of Huns had successfully pushed back a combined Roman-Visigothic army and threatened to capture Rome itself. It was not the emperor or one of his generals who went to negotiate peace with Attila, but Pope Leo the Great. We don't know everything they discussed by we do know that Attila was so impressed with the pope that he promised not to sack the city, and he moved his troops elsewhere.

This story illustrates what was happening frequently in the West. Priests, bishops and popes were stepping into the vacuum created by the collapse of order in cities, towns and rural areas all throughout Western society. This is not to suggest that the Church simply *became* the state, or that the clergy suddenly became political leaders. There was still a secular government which kept society going, separate and apart from the Church. The Church's increasing leadership role within society was not political, but *moral*.

Yet, people increasingly looked to the Church instead of to the state for moral leadership and for guidance in ordering their lives. The emperor's representative lived in Ravenna but increasingly lacked power. As the state was losing its moral force as the preserver of social order, the Church began to assume this role in place. But there were, nonetheless, always two very separate and distinct institutions—Church and state—attempting to guide society through very tumultuous times.

### AMBROSE: A BISHOP PROVIDES SOCIAL ORDER AND STABILITY

Consider one prominent bishop who served during this era. Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who was chosen bishop by the people of Milan in the year 374, Ambrose was unquestionably the most skilled leader of his day. He successfully asserted

<sup>5</sup> That is, accustomed to Roman law, culture and institutions, as established in the Mediterranean world for centuries.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the barbarian tribes, particularly in today's Eastern Europe, had already become Arian Christians. Arianism might have converted all of the barbarians had it not been for the acceptance of Catholic Christianity by the King of the Franks, Clovis (466-511).

the independence of those who suffered from poverty and the collapse of order. Ambrose and strong bishops like him served as focal points of unity in a society that was everywhere in a state of disintegration. But Ambrose nevertheless had to contend with an emperor who attempted to assert control over the churches of Milan. Ambrose fought back, telling the emperor that he had no authority over "the things of God." The emperor backed down, and the Church's independence from state interference was preserved.

From Ambrose's time onward, the Church would constantly find itself locked in a struggle to maintain its freedom and autonomy in the face of attempts by secular rulers to subordinate the Church to the state. Aside from being a strong leader would be as strong and successful as Ambrose was. Aside from being a strong personality, Ambrose succeeded because the times demanded moral leadership and spiritual discipline. People knew the state could not provide this leadership and discipline, and that the Church could. Consequently, people were willing to side with Ambrose against the emperor. In future times, when the Church grew lax and its moral authority diminished, people were more willing to side with the state when it attempted to control the Church.

## THE CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF PAPAL AUTHORITY

Gradually, the task of providing moral leadership in a disintegrating society fell increasingly to the bishops of Rome. At first not all Western bishops believed that the bishops of Rome, or the early popes, were superior to the other bishops in authority.

For example, one notable Western bishop, Cyprian of Carthage, who had been martyred in 258, had argued that all the bishops shared equally in the exercise of episcopal authority. Cyprian once disagreed with Bishop Stephen of Rome over the question of whether someone who had renounced the faith had to be rebaptized. Cyprian believed that he could make a decision on this issue by himself, even though the bishop of Rome said otherwise. Cyprian and Stephen never settled their disagreement (though the Church eventually accepted Pope Stephen's position of not rebaptizing).

By the time period we are considering in this chapter, the fourth and fifth centuries, Church unity was a more important concern than episcopal independence. Thus, independent bishops like Cyprian were now in a minority. By the fifth century, when people in the West looked to the Church for moral leadership, there already existed an institution which was fully Roman that could provide this leadership and the sense of unity which society needed—the papacy. By this time in our account, the unifying leadership of the papacy is best seen in the title given to the Bishop of Rome: "Patriarch of the West." It was thus the papacy that offered the best hope of imposing unity on the unstable diversity caused by the formation of the new barbarian kingdoms.

But this raised another challenge for the Church. How could the papacy respect the differences which existed from place to place within the vast stretches of the growing Christian world?

Or to put it another way, how could a working unity be established among the diverse peoples who lived in far-flung places outside the former borders of the Roman Empire? The papacy was faced with a continual struggle to balance unity with diversity. As we shall see in the pages ahead, sometimes the popes respected a healthy diversity among Christians, and sometimes they demanded conformity. The Church would often learn with difficulty that conformity and unity are not the same things.

## WORKING OUT A THEORY OF PAPAL PRIMACY

How did the papacy as an institution develop during the fourth and fifth centuries? From ancient times, Christians had paid respect to the city where Saint Peter, the first among equals in the apostolic body, had preached. In addition, the Christian emperors themselves gave a boost to the theory of papal primacy. They regulated the appointment of men to the bishopric of Rome and treated their appointees as superior in authority to the other bishops.

But by the time of Pope Leo the Great (440-461), the popes were vigorously asserting their independence from imperial control (what little of it there was left). They were also formulating their own theories of papal primacy.<sup>7</sup> Leo, for example, wrote that episcopal authority had been conferred first and foremost on Peter the Rock. The bishops of Rome were thus heirs to Peter's authority and his primacy over the other apostles.

The greatest exponent of papal primacy was Pope Gregory the Great (590-604). Gregory came from a prominent Roman family and had pursued a career in government before deciding to become a monk. This was typical in Gregory's day. Talented men often left secular positions and took their skills to the Church. Gregory dropped the popes' previous title of "universal bishop" and adopted the less imperious "servant of the servants of God." Still, Gregory wrote that leadership of the Church had been entrusted by Jesus to Peter, "the prince of all apostles." On Peter's death, Gregory said, leadership passed from Peter to Peter's successors, the bishops of Rome.

From Gregory's time onward, the Western Church came to be organized more and more around the papacy as the focal point of authority and leadership. And since the Church was the greatest moral force of the age, the papacy became the greatest moral institution of the age. It is little wonder that the

<sup>7</sup> "Primacy" simply means "the state of being first," that is, preeminent. It does not connote "the only," or "the sole." The popes were not the *sole* authority; they were the "first." The question became: Were the popes right because they were first, or first because they were right? Around the answer to this question revolved much later conflict between Christians.



future course of Church history would revolve around the competition between state and Church. These two competed constantly for moral authority over the minds and hearts of peoples in the newly forming barbarian kingdoms.

By Gregory's time, however, one thing was clear: the Western Church had become decisively Roman and Catholic. It was Roman in its role as preserver of the classical tradition of law, stability, order and wholeness. It was Catholic in its openness to the Holy Spirit's work among the barbarian nations. In attempting to be both Roman and Catholic, the Church would find itself faced with constant challenges. Sometimes it responded to these challenges in the spirit of this story and sometimes it responded in the ways of the world. As we follow this story in the pages ahead, let's continue to consider the question that the Spirit repeatedly asks: "Church, who are you and what do you say of yourself?"

### **FOCUS 5 TROUBLE FOR THE FUTURE: THE ORIGINS OF THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY**

When the persecutions stopped and Constantine became emperor, the Church was faced with a thorny problem. What do we do about all those people who gave in to the threat of persecution and renounced their faith? Now that it's permissible to be a Christian, do we exclude those who betrayed the gospel, or do we let them back into the Church? And what about bishops and priests who renounced their faith? Do they still have the authority to serve as valid ministers of the sacraments? This question rose to the level of a heated controversy in the Church of North Africa.

When Bishop Caecilian (311-345) was consecrated bishop of Carthage, one of the bishops consecrating Caecilian had earlier renounced the faith by turning sacred books over to the Roman secret police for burning. Several other bishops in North Africa said that this betrayer bishop had lost the power to consecrate other bishops. They reacted angrily by consecrating their own bishop to serve as bishop of Carthage. Their spokesman was a man named Donatus. Thus the controversy became known as the *Donatist* controversy.

Emperor Constantine supported Caecilian, and so the other bishops remained in the minority. Yet, their ideas and their movement spread. They eventually became a rival Church in North Africa. At times they were even the majority Church. They were suppressed only later in the fifth century after bitter debate and intervention on the part of the emperor. We will discuss the later stages of the Donatist controversy in the next chapter, as we take up the career of Saint Augustine.

### **FOCUS 6 THE EARLY CHURCH'S MOST FAMOUS 'CHARACTER' GIVES CHRISTIANITY THE BIBLE: SAINT JEROME AND THE VULGATE**

Perhaps the funniest and most eccentric character in the early Church was the scholar Jerome (374-419). Despite the fact that he was a saint (perhaps *because* of this fact), Jerome never gained control over his temper and his sharp tongue. One never had to guess what Jerome thought of a person he disliked. He would begin letters with such colorful salutations as, "To So-and-so, not a man, but a dog that returns to its own vomit, Greetings!" Jerome once made a pest of himself by telling everyone who would listen that he thought Pope Siricius had been a terrible choice for pope. And who did Jerome think was actually qualified to be pope? Jerome himself, of course.

Jerome dedicated himself wholeheartedly to his life's love—the translation of the sacred Scriptures into Latin, or the "vulgar," popular tongue. (Greek was considered to be the language of the upper-crust, educated classes.)

Although his was not the first Latin translation of the Bible, Jerome's version proved most influential because of his skill in translating Hebrew and Greek. Jerome's translation came to be known as the *Vulgate*, and was used as the standard Bible by all Christians for over a thousand years, and by Catholics until just recently. When one considers the tremendous obstacles Jerome had to overcome to make his translation—the scarcity of ancient manuscripts (scholars today have more than Jerome had), the chaos in society, the lack of communications, the lack of technical equipment—faith would say that the very human Jerome had a lot of help from the divine Spirit.

Through Jerome, the Catholic Church made the Bible available to the people. (Vulgate can also mean "of the people.") After Jerome, educated Christians became "Bible Christians," as they read, pondered and meditated on the truths of the faith as presented in Scripture. The Church became the great preserver and teacher of Scripture. Especially among the educated, Christian piety was first and foremost biblical piety. In later centuries, with the breakdown of culture and education, the Bible became less common in Christian society, but never less popular, thanks largely to Jerome.

# CONCLUDING THE AGE OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

**O**NE OF THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES of Catholicism is that its doctrine and practice are founded not only on the Bible and the teachings of the apostles, but also on the writings and teachings of intellectuals in the early Church who helped to elaborate upon the Bible and apostolic teaching. We have seen an example of such an elaboration in the case of Athanasius' refutation of Arianism. These early Christian intellectuals—men who developed and speculated on Christian doctrine until about the start of the seventh century—are called *Fathers of the Church*.<sup>1</sup> We owe them an incalculable debt. (See Focus 7, on page 37 for more on the meaning of the term *Church Fathers*.)

We could not hope adequately to discuss the writings of the Fathers in this chapter, or even in this book. Their writings fill several hundred volumes in both Greek and Latin, as there were both Greek Fathers and Latin Fathers, that is, Fathers who lived principally in the East and wrote in Greek, and Fathers who lived principally in the West and wrote in Latin. In this chapter, we will discuss the life and work of the man who is perhaps the most influential of all the Fathers—Saint Augustine. Then we will discuss developments in Christian life during and after Augustine's time, as we close out this period of the Fathers.

Augustine was unquestionably the greatest person of his time in many respects. His writings were the greatest in the sense that they leave us a better portrait of the inner journey of an early Christian Father than any other writings we have. His mind was the greatest in the sense that he decisively settled major issues, both theoretical and practical. His opinions affected the future course of Christianity in a way that no one in the early Church was able to match. His influence was also the greatest. No significant Christian thinker until modern times, when discussing a theological proposition, departed from Augustine's conclusions.

<sup>1</sup> Any dating of an era is tenuous, but we can safely adhere to the usual understanding by saying the Age of the Fathers began with the letter written by Bishop Clement of Rome in A.D. 95, and that it ended with the death of Isidore of Seville in 636.

Who was this man on whom so much of the later course of Christianity depended? He was born in 354 in North Africa of a pagan father and Christian mother, Patrick and Monica. He was not a healthy child and was probably small of stature, even for his day. Yet, he was extroverted and vivacious, and possessed a keen intellect. He studied the classics from boyhood, and had a slight familiarity as well with some of the Christian writings, which he rejected as being intellectually inferior to pagan works. From adolescence on, he was caught up in the lustful, sensual life-style that characterized the ancient world. By his day, Christian morality had not yet replaced Roman immorality as the predominant value system. Augustine succumbed in particular to sexual promiscuity, and he fathered an illegitimate child. By the age of twenty-nine Augustine was cynical and jaded, not knowing what he wanted to do with his life.

On the recommendation of friends, he traveled to Milan to listen to the preaching of Bishop Ambrose, whose reputation for persuasive rhetoric and oratory was widely known. Ambrose stunned Augustine with his masterful presentation of the gospel. Augustine felt himself unable to contradict Ambrose's eloquent words. Yet, although his mind was convinced of the truth of the gospel, Augustine did not have the will to resist sin. One day Augustine found himself in a friend's garden and experienced a conversion that changed both his life and that of the Church. While he was praying, he heard a child's voice coming to him over the wall of the garden, repeating the words, "Take and read, take and read..." On impulse, Augustine turned the pages of a nearby Bible and found Saint Paul's admonition in Romans 13:14, "[Pl]ut on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Augustine felt deep in his soul that these words had been written for him. In his later spiritual autobiography, entitled *Confessions*, Augustine felt "all the gloom and doubt" of his life "vanish away." He returned to North Africa, determined to live as a monk, and actually founded a monastic community. At age thirty-seven, however, he made the fateful decision to travel to the North African city of Hippo. When the Christians of Hippo asked him to stay on as a priest in their Church, Augustine reluctantly agreed. Four years later, he was consecrated bishop of Hippo, an office he would hold until his death in 430. Augustine achieved so much as a Church Father (see Focus 7, page 37) because he lived, preached and wrote as a pastor and not as a theoretician cut off from day-to-day issues. He brought his intellectual gifts to bear upon the practical problems which his flock faced in their everyday struggle to live the gospel. Augustine saw himself as a shepherd, first, and a theologian, second. As a result, we can still hear Augustine speaking to us today in our own struggles, even if those struggles aren't the same as those faced by the Christians of Hippo. In order to get some idea of how influential Augustine's teaching was, let's consider two doctrinal controversies that would reappear in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In that century both Catholic and Protestant theologians relied explicitly on Augustine for their respective positions.

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In the last chapter (see Focus 5, page 26) we discussed Donatism. By the time Augustine became bishop, the Donatists were no longer just a noisy minority. They had become a rival Church possessing as many if not more members in North Africa than the Roman Catholic Church. Their principal disagreement with the Catholic Church was this: The Catholic Church taught that the sacraments were validly administered by any priest who was authentically ordained and in good standing with his bishop. The Donatists disagreed. They argued that only a priest who was in the state of grace, or free from mortal sin, could validly administer the sacraments.

Augustine wrote and preached eloquently in support of the Catholic position. To his way of thinking, *subjective* standards such as the spiritual condition of the priest who administered a sacrament were impossible to judge. Moreover, anyone who doubted the holiness of a particular priest would have to reject the sacraments he administered. After all, how could someone really know whether a given priest was in a state of grace when he administered the sacraments? Augustine argued that God wanted the sacraments to be available to all people at all times. Thus, the only accurate standard which could be applied to judge the validity of a sacrament was the *objective* standard of the priest's valid ordination and good standing in the Church. Everyone could know this fact—whether the priest was in a state of grace or not.

In a series of conferences, or *synods*, with Donatist bishops, Augustine showed to nearly everyone's satisfaction that the Catholic position was correct and the Donatist position incorrect. Emperor Honorius backed the Catholics and condemned the Donatists. He ordered them to turn over their church buildings in North Africa to the Catholics. Some of the Donatists resisted. The emperor imposed a solution by force—the first time that force was used to settle a religious *schism*, or internal division, within the Church. Augustine at first disapproved of this use of force. Then he read a parable in Luke's Gospel, where the master of the banquet tells his agents "to force" his guests to come to the banquet (Luke 14:23). After that, Augustine accepted the use of force in resolving the Donatist controversy. The issue was settled for the moment—but only for the moment. Some Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century raised the same challenge to the validity of the sacraments as the Donatists had.

## PELAGIUS'S CHALLENGE: GRACE VERSUS FREE WILL

Another sticky problem arose when a wandering Irish priest named Pelagius openly disagreed with Augustine on the subject of grace. Augustine taught that the human will was incapable of responding to God's gift of salvation unless God first gave the sinner grace to say "yes" to God. Without grace, Augustine taught, human beings lack the power to be saved and to do good.

Pelagius, on the other hand, taught that the first impulse toward salvation came from human beings, rather than from God. For Pelagius, human beings possessed a good will and the capacity to perform good actions even without God. They had the *natural* ability to move toward salvation without God's grace. At a synod in Carthage in 418, the North African bishops condemned Pelagius's teachings on grace. They also rejected his related teaching that baptism was just a "blessing," and not actually necessary for salvation. Pelagius's view of baptism would resurface in certain strands of Protestant thought during the Reformation.

As Augustine was pressed to respond to Pelagius, he formulated his theory of predestination. That teaching has been variously interpreted and misinterpreted ever since. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin relied on it during the Reformation. The principal issue in the debate with Pelagius over grace naturally evolved into an issue of free will. If it's up to God who gets saved and who doesn't get saved, as Augustine taught, then are we human beings really free to choose salvation or reject it? Are we free to do good or to do evil? Augustine responded by saying that there is such a thing as free will. But he said that free will can only function in the direction of good in a soul that has been graced by God toward salvation. If God withholds the grace of salvation from a person, Augustine argued, who are we to criticize God?

In his later years, Augustine showed that he was not really teaching that God wants some people to be damned and some to be saved, as, for example, John Calvin would teach during the Reformation. Instead, he really meant that God gives everyone the *capacity* to do good and be saved. Nevertheless, it is only God who can enable people to *develop* this capacity. God does this through the means of grace, a free gift.

Not everyone in the Catholic Church was satisfied with Augustine's explanation. After his death, a great debate arose over this question of grace versus free will. At the Synod of Orange (in France) in 529, the bishops of southern France agreed with Augustine's teaching that human beings cannot be saved without God's grace. Nevertheless, the bishops declared that God wants no one to be damned. If people are damned, the bishops said, it is *their* doing and not God's. It was this interpretation of Augustine which the Catholic Church generally accepted from that time on. But, as noted, the Protestant Reformers would interpret Augustine differently than did the Catholic Church.

## ORDINARY CATHOLIC LIFE IN THE AGE OF AUGUSTINE

Augustine's teachings on such issues as sacramental validity and free will went a long way toward helping the Church achieve its medieval Catholic identity, to be formed in the centuries ahead. Let's look for a moment at that

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evolving Catholic identity as it is reflected in the life of the Church to about the time of Pope Gregory's death in 604, where we left off in the last chapter. The first thing we notice is that the Church's sacramental life has become more fully defined. Baptism and the Eucharist are still the principal sacraments, but the Sacrament of Penance now has also become more important in the life of the Church. Baptism, which now was performed more and more frequently, owing to the increase in converts, ceased to be administered principally at the cathedral and during the Easter vigil as before. Baptism was now regularly administered in parish churches throughout the year. And since whole households were not baptized as frequently as in the first three centuries,<sup>2</sup> newborn infants now were assigned "godparents," in the place of actual parents. The godparents recited baptismal promises for the infants.

As for the celebration of the Eucharist, by Augustine's time a standardized form of celebration known as the "Roman rite" (or ceremonial form) was becoming the norm in most places. It had been developed by the Church in Rome. And as the Bible came to be consolidated into Old and New Testaments, Scripture readings were added to the Eucharistic celebration. Roman rite is preserved today virtually identical to its fourth-century form. The is the first of four options found in Catholic *missals* which a priest can use in praying the prayers of the Mass. This rite was first written in Greek, but by the late fourth century it was translated into Latin. Latin came to be the usual language in which "Mass" was celebrated.

The word *Mass* comes from the Latin word for "send." The name refers to the practice by which the celebrant would send the people out into the world after the liturgy to live and proclaim the Gospel. Today, the priest frequently says, "Go forth to love and serve the Lord and one another." Again, the emphasis is on the congregation's being sent forth as messengers of the gospel. The Mass, then was principally a *sending forth*. For the early Christians, what happened at Mass was not something that was to be kept in the church building. In addition to Mass, Christians attended public prayer services, such as morning *lauds* and evening *vespers* and *compline*.

The Sacrament of Penance underwent a steady evolution in the days of the early Church. At first, Christians believed that once a baptized member of the Church committed a serious sin, he or she could only be readmitted into the body of the faithful *once*. That readmission took place only by making a *public* confession of serious sin, which was defined in most places as murder, adultery or apostasy. After confession, the sinner then had to complete a penance usually consisting of a prolonged period of fasting combined with almsgiving. Only then did the entire congregation give its *public* absolution and allow the sinner to return to the Eucharistic celebration.

<sup>2</sup> That is, it now was becoming common for infants to be born of Christian parents. Thus, the Church now baptized infants alone, rather than as part of a household that had converted to Christianity.

After Constantine's conversion, however, more and more people came forward with serious sins. Of course, there were then more Christians to commit sins. Gradually the Church allowed confession of sins to be made in private and on more than one occasion. The nature of the penance assigned to the sinner likewise changed, with prayers being added to fasting. In some cases prayers alone were given as penance. Finally, by the time of Pope Gregory the Great, absolution was everywhere being given by priests in private, rather than by the entire congregation in public.

## DEVOTION TO MARY AND THE SAINTS

Popular piety during this era revolved around the Eucharist, listening to stories about Jesus from the Gospels, shared prayer in homes and devotion to the saints. The latter devotion started in the first century. The first Christians believed that holy men and women who had died in God's grace could intervene before God for those on earth.

We find evidence of this in writings on the walls of the *catacombs*, or underground burial chambers from the first century. There Christians scrawled such prayers on the walls as "Vincent, you are in Christ, pray for Phoebe. Paul and Peter, pray for Victor. Sentianus, in your prayers, pray for us, for we know you are in Christ." Prayers to the saints were incorporated into the Roman rite of the Mass and thus became part of the official liturgy<sup>3</sup> of the Church.

The greatest of the saints in the early Church was the Virgin Mary. The early Christians understood Mary to have been specially privileged by God in ways that the rest of the saints were not. For example, we find early church buildings named after the honors God had bestowed on Mary, such as "the church of Mary's Assumption." This illustrates something we noticed in Chapter Two. The faithful in their devotions and everyday sense of the faith also contribute to the Church's belief, just as do intellectuals like Augustine. The doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were not declared infallible doctrines of the Catholic faith until 1848 and 1950, respectively. Nonetheless, the Church long ago authorized devotions pointing toward these doctrines as they were expressed by the faithful in everyday worship and piety.

## MONASTICISM: THE LAITY STARTS A MOVEMENT

The most significant development in Christian spirituality during the days of the early Church was monasticism. We alluded to the origins of monasticism in Chapter One (see page 5). Many Christians had fled to the desert and other isolated places to avoid persecution. Yet this is not the whole story of how monasticism got started.

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The father of monasticism was an Egyptian, Anthony of the Desert (250-355). He went to live alone in the desert, not because he feared persecution, but because he felt that God had called him to live away from the world. He wanted to spend his entire life in prayer and fasting for the salvation of others. Anthony came to this conclusion after hearing the Gospel passage read in which Christ admonished the rich young man to sell all that he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and "come follow me" (Matthew 19:16-21). Anthony and the other founders of monasticism believed that following after Jesus meant single-hearted, all-or-nothing commitment to a life in isolated places where prayer, fasting and manual labor filled their day.

Monasticism was first and foremost a *lay* movement. The first monks were not priests and had no desire to become priests. This obviously applied to the first monastic nuns as well. It was only later in Church history that monks became priests and were drawn into the hierarchical pyramid of Church ranks. Anthony's hermetical style of monasticism (living alone as a *hermit*) attracted many followers, but another style of monasticism also developed. In the *cenobion* church building to share work, meals and prayer.

This communal style of monasticism became popular in the West thanks to Benedict of Nursia (480-550). Saint Benedict founded some twelve monasteries from his hermit's cave in Subiaco, Italy. Later, he started a larger monastery at Monte Cassino. Monte Cassino became the founding headquarters of the Benedictine movement, which we shall encounter again in our study.

Benedict's sister, Scholastica, founded a monastic community of Benedictine nuns. The women's branch of monasticism, like the men's branch, traces its origins back to the East. Two Roman women, Melania the Elder and Paula the Elder, had traveled east to found communities of nuns during Jerome's time, and were in fact Jerome's friends. Paula is notable for the fact that she was the mother of five children. When her husband died and her children were grown, Paula heeded the call of the gospel to leave everything and follow after the Lord.

## LEAVING THE ERA OF THE FATHERS: A CHURCH IN TRANSITION

In later chapters, as we continue to explore how the Church defined and redefined its identity throughout its history, we will again study the everyday spiritual life of Christians. But let us leave the early Church now, and turn toward the Church of the Middle Ages. We leave a Church founded on a stable footing—on the blood of the martyrs, on the creeds of the great councils, on the Roman Catholic institution, on the achievement of Augustine and the other Church Fathers and on the faith of the ordinary believer.

We also leave a Church that changed greatly after the first three centuries. The sacramental life of the Church has become more organized and devel-

<sup>3</sup> Liturgy means "people's work."

oped. It has adapted to meet the needs of a growing Christian population. In the cities, most priests are now becoming full-time ministers, rather than working part-time at other occupations as Saint Paul did. Small community meetings of Christians are being replaced by large congregations meeting together in large buildings.<sup>4</sup> Fewer bishops know their flocks by name.

Ministries are changing, too. In the first three centuries, unordained people, men and women,<sup>5</sup> took an active part in training others for life as a Christian. Now, Christian education and formation is being taken over by ordained men. Further, doctrine is becoming highly formalized, and it is being taught more and more by ordained men chosen by bishops, rather than by lay men and women chosen by local congregations. Dioceses led by bishops are replacing small congregations led by hometown pastors. And bishops themselves are now being *appointed*, rather than chosen by the faithful. Sometimes bishops are chosen by other bishops, sometimes they are appointed by the emperor. And while the people of Rome selected their bishop until the mid-fourth century, now the popes are being selected by the emperors or chosen by the priests of the Roman diocese.

The roles of women in the Church are likewise changing. In the early Church women served as "deaconesses." Now only men may be ordained as deacons. And while priests in the early Church were frequently married, there is now a growing movement to make priests remain celibate. All in all, the Church is growing toward a more formal structure. It is becoming less of a family and more of an institution. As with all changes in the Church, something is lost and something gained with the changes we find at the end of the era of the Fathers.

In the next chapters, we will continue to follow the evolution and development of the Church's self-image. And we will continue to judge whether these changes in the Church's self-image have been good or bad. We will also strive to learn how the Church's experience during these times affects our lives as Christians today.

## FOCUS 7

### LEAVING THE AGE OF THE FATHERS— AND MOTHERS—OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The period of Church history through the first six centuries is sometimes called the *patristic period*, after the Latin, *pater*, for "father." This term refers to the fact that by about the time of Pope Gregory the Great's death in 604 the Church's doctrine had been essentially settled by the Fathers of the Church. The Fathers of the Church taught in the form of writings. Pope Gregory was one of these Western Fathers, as were Augustine, Athanasius, Jerome, Ambrose and Irenaeus. We have discussed all of these in preceding pages. All are regarded as saints of the Church.

But, there were saints who were not Fathers. Consider Scholastica, for example, the founder of the women Benedictines. This raises another important point. Since women in the society in which the early Church was situated were not generally given as much education as men, the founding Mothers of the Church did not leave writings behind as men did.

This fact should not keep us from acknowledging the historical fact that women made enormous contributions to the formation of the early Church. Consider Augustine's mother, Monica, for example, who prayed for years that her son would be converted. Without her we would never have had a Saint Augustine. We don't know the names of the early Christian women as well as we do the names of the men. Yet, this should not deter us from referring to the first six centuries of the early Church as the age of the Fathers—and the Mothers—of Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> Although in large cities like Rome, basilicas had replaced house churches as early as the second century.

<sup>5</sup> While women served as "deaconesses" in the first century (and we cannot be sure what was meant by that title), after that time their ministry was restricted to working as catechists to other women and as "ordinary laborers."