

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 2: The Medieval Church

### THE CHURCH AND THE STATE

#### *Constantine's conversion*

Constantine was proclaimed emperor in York in AD 305, and over the next 20 years conquered the entire Roman Empire. In AD 312, on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge outside Rome, he had a dream in which he saw a Christian symbol, “chi-rho” in the sky. After success in the battle, he professed Christian faith, and then proclaimed the Christianity was to be the official religion of the Empire.

#### *Christianity – the state religion*

Christianity now quickly came to occupy a privileged position in the Roman Empire. Worship had previously been secret and often dangerous, but now became open, and many of the traits of emperor worship began to appear in church services: incense, ministerial robes, processions and choirs. Increasingly grandiose church buildings reflected the Old Testament temple pattern, with a sanctuary and an altar. The early church's eager anticipation of the new heaven and new earth in contrast to the hardships of this life was rapidly eroded, and the ideals of worldly success permeated the church.

#### *Asceticism and Monasticism*

Some Christians were dismayed by this corruption of the church. Different sects split off, claiming they were the real church. But the principal reaction against state religion was monasticism. Individual believers went off to live alone in isolation in the desert, renouncing all comforts and company, to concentrate on ascetic living and worship. Some, such as the “pillar saints” went to bizarre lengths in self-denial.

Soon larger communities developed in monasteries. The first large monastic order was the Benedictines, founded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Italy by Benedict. As time went by many monasteries relaxed the severity of their lifestyle, and many monasteries became wealth and influential, although the Franciscans returned to voluntary poverty. The Dominican order focussed especially on study and doctrine.

## *Augustine*

Augustine was born in North Africa in AD 354. He went to study philosophy in Carthage, and lived a dissolute, immoral life. He studied Christianity and accepted it intellectually, but didn't want to change his lifestyle. His prayer at that time was:

“Give me chastity and continence – but not too soon!”

One day in a garden he heard a little girl singing a ditty: “Take and read.” He picked up Paul's letter to the Romans and read part of Ch.13. He was convicted and converted and went on to become a great Christian theologian. For many years he was the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

Augustine vigorously opposed the heresy of “Pelagianism.” Pelagius was an English monk who claimed that there is no such thing as original sin, and that men and women have complete freedom to sin or not to sin. Augustine insisted that the bible tells us we are slaves to sin, and that conversion is God's initiative, not ours.

Augustine wrote a famous book called, “The City of God,” in which he described the “earthly city” (pagan society following its own desires) and the “City of God” (true Christians living amongst the pagans). These correspond to the wheat and the weeds in Jesus' parable, and will be separated at the final judgment.

## **THE CHURCH IN TURMOIL**

### *The fall of the Roman Empire*

During the early years of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the western half of the empire was invaded by barbarians from the east and north, and Western Europe fragmented into numerous different states. The Eastern Empire survived intact for another 1,000 years, based on its capital, Constantinople. The Eastern Orthodox Church was largely under the control of the state, whilst in the West, the Roman Catholic Church and, in particular, the popes, came to hold the real power.

### *The spread of Christianity*

Just as the persecution of the early church led to the spread of the Gospel in the Near East, so the collapse of the Roman Empire led to the

spread of Christianity in Europe. The Gospel reached much of Western Europe by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and in the East, Orthodox Christianity spread through the Balkans, to the Slavs and Czechs, to Egypt and to Russia. “Cyrillic” script, the lettering still used in Russia and SE Europe, was devised specifically to take the bible to the Slavs. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century Queen Olga of Russia was converted and sent for missionaries from Germany, and orthodox Christianity became firmly established there.

### *The East-West Schism*

On Christmas Day AD 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charles, the king of the Franks, as Holy Roman Emperor, and he became known as Charlemagne. The power of the Roman Catholic Church continued to grow. It looked to secular rulers in the west for support and became increasingly distanced from Eastern Orthodoxy. East and West differed over the relationship between state and church, and over clerical celibacy. But it was a trivial argument about the addition of a single word, “filioque,” to the Nicene Creed by the West that led to the final bust-up. On 16<sup>th</sup> June 1054, Pope Leo IX’s ambassador to the East strode into St Sophia’s Cathedral in Constantinople at the start of the mass, and slammed down on the high altar a sentence of excommunication against the Eastern Orthodox patriarch. The split between East and West has remained to this day.

## **THE CHURCH UNDER ATTACK**

### *Islam*

In AD 610 in Mecca, Mohammed claimed to have received a divine revelation from the angel Gabriel, and pronounced himself the last of God’s prophets (successor to the Hebrew prophets and Jesus). His message was written down in the Qur’an, and demanded submission from men and women in every area of life. Mohammed was forced to flee to Medina where the first Muslim community was established, but later returned in triumph to Mecca, and Islam spread very rapidly throughout the Arab world, and also into Spain and briefly southern France. Palestine and Jerusalem itself eventually fell to the Muslim armies.

### *Crusades*

For more than 100 years, starting early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe fought a series of misguided crusades to recapture the “Holy Land” for the church. Much blood was shed in this wrong-headed attempt to

promote God's kingdom by physical force instead of the preaching of the Gospel.

## **THE CHURCH AND PHILOSOPHY**

### *Scholasticism*

During 9<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in the monasteries and church schools, there was increasing interest in analysing and systematising Christian thought in the categories of classic philosophy. A series of brilliant scholars, often known as the “schoolmen,” taught and wrote extensively. Much of the work the scholastics produced was arid and only of academic value.

Anselm in the 12<sup>th</sup> century produced a proof for the existence of God:

“So true is it that there exists something than which a greater is inconceivable, that its non-existence is inconceivable: and this thing you are, O Lord our God!”

The most famous of the scholastics was Thomas Aquinas, who wrote commentaries on most books of the bible, and tried in two giant tomes to present Christian thought firstly as divine revelation, and secondly in terms of human reason. Sadly, these complex works tend to obscure, rather than illuminate, biblical truth.

## **THE CHURCH CORRUPTED**

### *The power of the Roman Catholic Church*

Leo the Great in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was the first pope to claim direct succession from the apostle Peter. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Gregory I introduced many of the traditional doctrines of Roman Catholicism, including the repeated sacrifice of Christ whenever the mass is celebrated, the necessity of CONFESSION of sins and ABSOLUTION by the priest, and PENANCE as punishment for sins – in the form of prayers, fasting, alms, pilgrimage or physical pain.

It was therefore believed that human works must be added to Christ's death to pay for our sins. Pope Gregory also introduced the doctrine of PURGATORY, a place where it was claimed the punishment of believers who hadn't done adequate penance on earth could be completed before

they were admitted to heaven. In 1215 the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council adopted the doctrine of TRANS-SUBSTANTIATION, which meant that, during the celebration of the mass, the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Christ – reaffirming the sacrifice of Christ again and again at every mass. So there was no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church – if you were excommunicated, you were damned. In 1245 a papal bull was issued:

“It is absolutely necessary for salvation that all human creatures be under the Roman pontiff.”

Numerous abuses of power and influence flourished in the Roman Catholic Church:

- SIMONY – the offer of money in return for a cushy ecclesiastical position
- ABSENTEEISM – church leaders neglected their charges, often because they held a whole series of lucrative positions in different places
- NEPOTISM – the appointing of relatives to important positions in the church
- INDULGENCES – payment of money to the church in return for the promise that the pains of purgatory would be shortened, either for oneself, or for a loved one who had already died

