

Chapter Nine

THE RE-ESTABLISHING OF CHRISTENDOM

'The First Christendom' (the first Christendom-proper) could be said to have lasted less than twenty years – from 391 to 410. In a rather weaker sense, it might be thought of as having lasted from Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 until the fall of Rome to the Goths in 410 – just under a century. It's worth observing, though, that if Constantine had been followed by another pagan emperor like Diocletian, this 'First Christendom' would never have come into being. As we'll see again with Charlemagne and his Holy Roman Empire (from 800), which revived Christendom, some projects which seemingly fail gain a new lease of life later.

Monasticism – a radical Christian alternative

Even before Constantine had set in process the project that would become Christendom, a movement arose that would affect Christianity very differently: monasticism. In 3rd century Egypt, in Alexandria and the Nile delta, there was a large Christian population living very near uninhabited land. At church in 271, aged 20, Antony, the son of well-to-do Egyptian peasants, heard Jesus' words read: "If you want to be perfect go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me." This he proceeded to do, and began to live alone, dedicating himself to a life of prayer and manual work. 'No doubt individuals had acted in a similar way before,' says David Knowles. 'Antony differed from them both in the determination and sanctity of a long life, and in his gift for inspiring and guiding others, the stream of imitators that soon became a flood, begging Antony to tell them the secret of his life.'¹ The climate in Egypt allowed a person to exist all the

¹ *Christian Monasticism*; 1969; London; Wiedenfeld and Nicholson; SBN 303 74616 5; p10.

year round on a meagre diet in caves or primitive shelters. Although Antony moved further and further into the desert, disciples still sought out this saintly man and his wise advice until he died aged 105. Many would come to follow his example:

What may be called the golden age of Egyptian hermit life ran from around 330 to around 440. The first 'fathers of the desert' lived alone by twos and threes in caves, huts, or brick-built cells, supporting themselves on the produce of their vegetable patches and small fields, making baskets of palm fronds which they sold to visitors or agents for money with which to buy the other necessities of life. Their time was spent in prayer, in work and in reading and memorising the scriptures; such a life, if it were to be satisfying and fruitful, demanded an uncommon degree of psychological stability and self-control. Their penances and fasts were [commended] by contemporaries and have been criticised by modern writers ... [The] element of severe physical and mental endurance, accepted as a spiritual discipline, was part of the early monastic spiritual climate ...²

A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT MONASTIC WAY It was a simple step from the solitary life to a group of hermits meeting together weekly for Communion and sharing advice and practical help:

Less to be expected was ... the birth [again in Egypt], within a few years of the first monk, of one who was to be the first master of the common life. Pachomius [long 'o'] (286-346) was a convert from paganism as a young man, and after some years spent as a hermit felt the call to provide a monastic life for the many. An organiser and administrator of the highest ability, he created with no preceding model a monastic congregation which had all the elements that were to be gradually rediscovered and applied by western founders many centuries later. Recruits came in hundreds, particularly from the lower classes of peasant and townsfolk, and Pachomius gave them a rule and an elaborate [constitution]. Chastity and poverty were presupposed, and to these Pachomius added obedience ... as a condition of community life. While the hermit obeyed an elder as [someone] more spiritually wise and experienced, the Pachomian monk obeyed his superiors as the [organisers] of his life and energies, and regarded the consequent abandonment of personal choice

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as a spiritual gain of the first importance. Organisation and obedience implied sanctions, and the penal code of Pachomius was the first of a great family reaching from Egypt to the modern world. In daily life the regime of the monastery was moderate in comparison with that of the hermitage. Wine, meat and oil were banned, but fish, cheese, fruit and vegetables were allowed in addition to bread. The community prayer, made up of psalms and [readings from the Bible], was not notably longer than the modern monastic office [service]. Work was an essential feature of the life. The monasteries were small towns of a thousand or two thousand inhabitants; they were divided into houses of thirty or forty, in which monks were grouped according to their skills or crafts – tailors, bakers, gardeners, and the rest – and surplus products were sold down the Nile to Alexandria ... The monasteries were grouped as an ‘order’ under a single superior-general, Pachomius and his successors, who visited each monastery frequently and could transfer monks from one to another at will. Beneath them were the heads of monasteries, each with an assistant, who ruled over the heads of houses ... Besides its legacy of institutions and examples of holiness the Egyptian [monasticism] left to posterity a rich literature of the spiritual life.³

It’s quite possible that Pachomius’ plan for a monastery reflected the military camps he’d have known as a soldier, when a young man.

A LIFE OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE Antony and those who’d follow him understood themselves to be imitating Christ in doing battle with Satan in the wilderness. Purity of heart was a key quest for them. The following story from Antony’s life, when aged about 35, is given by Derwas Chitty in his *The Desert a City*:

He is gradually casting out the temptations of his own thoughts, until the demons, expelled from within, begin to attack him from without, even as Satan in the wilderness attacked the Lord into whom he could find no entry. This stage of training comes to its climax when Antony goes outside into one of the tombs near to the village to be so assaulted that his friend finds him unconscious, and carries him up to the village church believing him to be dead – but he awakes in the night and insists on being taken back to the tomb, where he challenges the demons’ attack and they

³ pp13-15

cannot penetrate his defence. Then at last his urgent prayer is answered, and the quiet light of Christ disperses the demonic manifestations. Complaining, “Where were You? Why did You not appear from the beginning to end my torments?” he hears the reply, “Antony, I was here: but I was wanting to see you take them on”.⁴

Only then does he cross the Nile and shut himself up in an old fort in the desert for twenty years, where bread is brought to him twice a year (!). From this time on he has the power to heal the sick and cast out evil spirits, and to function as an effective pastoral counsellor. Athanasius, in his *Life of St Antony*, writes too of the anointing on Antony’s preaching, such that now his words ‘persuaded many to choose the solitary life; and so henceforth there arose monasteries even in the mountains, and the desert was made a city by monks coming out from their own [city] and enrolling in the heavenly citizenship.’

This kind of power and influence came to be reproduced in the monastic communities that formed around Pachomius, if not always as strongly. But, like any group that wants to live a radical life at the cutting edge, the monastic movement was always vulnerable. Designed for absolute commitment, after three generations the quality of monastic life started to show signs of serious decay. Homosexuality began to be a problem. Jealousy led to power struggles. Division arose between the intellectual monks and their uneducated brothers. When in 407-8 barbarians invaded, and the founding monastery of Scetis in the Egyptian desert was overrun, this was seen as the Lord’s judgement for unfaithfulness and disobedience. But monastic life was already spreading elsewhere and, in the process, regenerating. This would often be the pattern into the future: pioneering, prosperity, decline, a new start elsewhere – or reform.

THE NEW MOVEMENT SPREADS Monasticism spread across the whole of the eastern, Greek-influenced part of the Roman Empire during the 300s. ‘There

⁴ 1996; New York; St Vladimir’s Seminary Press (Basil Blackwell and Mott in UK); SBN 0-913836-45-1; p3. This happens at the time Diocletian comes to power. (I’ve changed some rather dated wording at the end of the quotation).

was no apostle to carry it to Italy and the west,' says Knowles, 'no colonisation from the east and no action of bishops or civil rulers to introduce it. It spread gradually and sporadically as a plant spreads from seeds that are blown abroad. The most effective proselytising agent was Athanasius, who'd been a friend of Antony and who spent the first two of his five terms of exile in the west ... at Trier (335-7), then the effective capital of the western empire, and ... at Rome (339-46).'⁵ Knowles again: 'The tide of monastic life swept most rapidly along the northern shores of the Mediterranean to Lérins [an island off Cannes] and Marseilles (400-40), the former being the home to John Cassian [a Scythian from the Black Sea area, who'd lived amongst the Egyptian hermits for 15 years, and then travelled west], and here the inspiration came directly from the east.'⁶

Neither the bishops nor the landowners in the Western Empire liked the newly-arrived monastic movement. But the future lay with the monks. If anybody can be credited with creating Europe and the Western world, it's them – not that popular accounts of history usually acknowledge that. As the Roman Empire in the West collapsed, it was the monasteries that strengthened the Western Church, so allowing it to play the pioneering role required of it. The monasteries attracted able young men from well-to-do families. They educated them to a high standard. While some of these individuals become capable leaders within their own orders, even more were released to serve the wider Church, which had its own desperate need of such gifted people. In due course, national rulers found it essential to recruit able, educated monks as advisers and government ministers (there was virtually no one else to choose from). The monasteries' education and training programmes were in a class of their own. The monks became, consequently, the educators of the nations that would become Western Europe. It's no accident that the older parts of Oxford and Cambridge Universities are constructed very much like monasteries – to a large extent they were brought

⁵ *Christian Monasticism*; p25.

⁶ p25. *Massilia*, Marseilles, was one of many Greek colonies in the western Mediterranean.

into being by monk-academics. The monastic system was largely responsible, too, for the school system that fed the universities.

A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT Abbot John Cassian of Lérins (c. 360 – 435) had helped bring about a change of emphasis in monasticism which allowed it to play a constructive role in the development of what would become European life. In his early thinking, he'd regarded the hermit's life as superior to that of the monastic community. This was because he understood community life to involve too many distractions, whereas the solitary life could be a matter of contemplation – seeking the 'vision of God'. The apparent inspiration for this kind of thinking was the superiority of Mary's way of life to Martha's (Luke 10:42). But behind that was the Greek (Platonist/Neo-Platonist) philosophical concept of *theoria* – the philosopher's devotion to contemplating philosophy's god. Cassian came to see that the unclouded vision of God was impossible in this life. So his focus moved to a new kind of 'contemplation': the study and understanding of the Scriptures. Because of Cassian's great influence, the result was the removal of a potentially most unhelpful influence in the Western monastic tradition, and its replacement with something much healthier.⁷ In such a way, Scripture was made fundamental to the developing European Christianity – during what we in northern Europe think of as the 'Catholic' centuries.

Augustine – the theologian of the Middle Ages ...

The more I've pondered the rise of 'Western civilisation', the more it's seemed to me that the two groups who've done most both to make it possible and to shape it have been the scholar-intellectuals and the thinkers who've devoted themselves to life's practical challenges.

⁷ See ch 12 in Robert Markus, *The End Of Ancient Christianity*, 1990; Cambridge, UK; CUP; ISBN 0 521 32716 4 (h/b), 0 521 33949 9 (p/b).

He might have died in 430, but for more than a thousand years to come Augustine of Hippo, through his writings, would provide the Western Church with its basic orientation. 'Without St Augustine's massive intellect and deep spiritual perception Western theology would never have taken the shape which is familiar to us.' So the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. He only came to occupy this role in the scheme of things because his ideas – as those of no other thinker – seemed to make sense of their situation for generations of leaders who followed him.

... and three other foundational leaders

The men I want to draw attention to here appeared on the scene at the time when life in the West was becoming anything from difficult to impossible. The old order had largely disintegrated as barbarian, Germanic people-groups⁸ overran what had been the Western Empire, leaving future prospects very uncertain. But when emerging Europe needed it, the Christian community could produce individuals able to transform their world.

BOETHIUS A Roman and a Catholic, Boethius (c.480-524) was an intellectual from an aristocratic family appointed 'master of offices' (in charge of the production of official documents in Latin) by Theodoric, ruler of Italy, a Goth and consequently an Arian 'Christian'. Had he lived longer, he would have made even more of an impact than he did. His intention had been systematically to translate the works of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle from Greek into Latin. Even so, the limited amount he managed exercised enormous influence on the learning of the Middle Ages. Medieval philosophy has had a bad press, largely because of substantial negative Renaissance and Reformation propaganda. In fact it was a stupendous achievement. (An excellent account of it to read is F.C.

⁸ E.g. the Visigoths (Spain), the Franks (France), the Saxons (Germany and England) – and many more.

Copleston's *Medieval Philosophy*.⁹) It was handicapped, though, by having inherited only a fraction of what Boethius had intended to pass on to following generations. When the rest of Aristotle's and Plato's surviving works became known at the Renaissance (in the 1400s especially), they precipitated an intellectual revolution. Boethius' textbooks on the standard academic syllabus, the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), were in common use throughout the Middle Ages.

When – accused by Theodoric of treachery (which he strongly denied) – Boethius was imprisoned, he wrote what would become a classic, the *Consolations of Philosophy*. It would find its way into almost every medieval library, and was among the first of the Western books translated into vernacular [native] languages; in the case of England, by King Alfred into Old English, by Chaucer into Middle English, and by Queen Elizabeth I into modern English. That's influence! At the end of the book, Philosophy¹⁰ tells Boethius, 'You don't put your hope in God in vain, nor are your prayers to him pointless The judge who knows everything knows all about your life.' His life ended in brutal execution. But he came to be known as 'the schoolmaster of Medieval Europe'.

CASSIODORUS Theodoric then employed another gifted intellectual from the Roman aristocracy, Cassiodorus (c.485-c.580), a relative of Boethius – ironically to succeed him in the same role. His real calling, though, was to the religious life, which led him to found the monastery of Vivarium in Calabria, in southern Italy. This he made into something of an educational establishment, in which he encouraged secular as well as religious learning and the copying of manuscripts. Cassiodorus turned out to be the greatest single contributor to the preservation of academic learning in the barbarised West – and without his efforts, no Latin classic, except those of Virgil, might have come down to us. The curriculum he wrote for his monks, the *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning*, exercised a

⁹ 1952: London; Methuen & Co Ltd..

¹⁰ Philosophy personified, that is. 'Philosophy' means, literally, 'the love of wisdom', of course.

profound influence on the history of the West. He didn't foresee, though, the consequences of the method he employed – whereby he separated biblical study from secular knowledge. It's often the theologian Thomas Aquinas, much later on (mid-1200s), who's accused of introducing the sacred-secular divide into Christian thinking, with his categories of 'nature' and 'supernature' (corresponding to reason and revelation). In fact, Cassiodorus seems to have been the culprit. The result of what he'd done can be seen in the fact that, most of the time, the two parts of his *Institutions* were rarely bound together. The Bible sees all reality – and so all knowledge about reality – as a unity. But Cassiodorus, influenced by his classical background, allowed it to be divided. Over time, especially when the universities came into being, the 'secular' would take on a life of its own. This is still a problem in the West. But Cassiodorus's treatment of the ancient classical syllabuses, the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (see above), proved a powerful tool in the hands of educators.

ST BENEDICT Harder to assess is the monk, Benedict of Nursia (c. 480 - c. 550). Famous for the monastic Rule that bears his name, the founder of Monte Cassino (near Naples) has been called the 'Patriarch of Western Monasticism'. Historical research, however, has shown that the Rule is mainly a compilation by St Benedict of earlier monastic rules¹¹. His real achievement seems to have been the development of an approach to the monastic life that was both full of insight into the human condition and durable. Not surprisingly, the standard form of monasticism in Europe and the West over the centuries has overwhelmingly been the Benedictine one.

'The rule describes the life of [monks in community] ... under the kindly authority of an abbot. It was a life of dedication, yet a life of moderation, avoiding extremes of laxity and severity. The Rule strikes the modern reader as sensible, discreet, practical and, in a word, liveable. We read, "And so we establish a school for God's service ... , in which we hope we are founding an institution where there is nothing

¹¹ Particularly *The Rule of the Master* – of unknown authorship.

harsh or burdensome ...” He outlined a stable community with a life lived in prayer (*opus dei*, the work of God) and work. The abbot should mitigate the rule for the aged and infirm. This rule with its lofty idealism and pragmatic flexibility recommended itself to the ages.’¹²

If these three were lay-ers of foundations, mention should be made also of a man who was certainly their equal – but whose work, though strategic, couldn’t be as foundational, because of his appearance on the scene later on, and in the ‘wrong’ place (Spain). His contribution exemplifies the quality of what could be produced in the most unhelpful circumstances. Isidore, the scholarly archbishop of Seville (d.636), produced as his greatest work the *Etymologies* – a book with a somewhat misleading title. It was about much more than the derivations of words. Indeed, it constituted a virtual encyclopedia of what was then known. Much more than a mere compilation, it’s been called ‘the basic book of the entire Middle Ages’, and its twenty volumes cover such subjects as medicine, law, literature, God and his angels and the saints, the earth and the universe, as well as food and drink, furniture, and leisure activities.

It was a combination of the disciplined Christian life – particularly that of the monastic communities – and the commitment to learning, from the Dark Ages through into the later Middle Ages, that formed the basis of Western Christian civilisation. This is why men such as these are so important in our history.

Two outstanding popes

Popes Leo the Great (Leo I, 440-61) and Gregory the Great (Gregory I, 540-604) show how capable some of the senior leaders the Catholic Church could be, as that institution sought to find a way ahead and build during the bewildering times of transition. Indeed, these two popes are the only ones ever to have been

¹² F Donald Logan, *A History Of the Church In The Middle Ages*; 2002; London; Routledge; ISBN 0-415-13288-6 (hbk) or 0-415-13289-4 (pbk); p20.

remembered as 'Great' – although, apparently, the late John Paul II is under consideration for that honour too.

LEO I Leo shared none of the reservations Augustine came to have about the place of Rome in the scheme of things. According to T Jalland in *The Life and Times of St Leo the Great*: 'from Leo's point of view the Roman Empire, like the Roman see, was a divine institution, formed by the providence of God for the express purpose of promoting the spread of the Christian Gospel.'¹³ 'He inherited all Damasus' romanticism about the past and his sense that the grandeur of Rome's imperial greatness was continuous with its high Christian dignity,' says Chadwick (*The Early Church*). 'St Peter and St Paul, he explained in a sermon ... had replaced Romulus and Remus as the city's protecting patrons.'¹⁴ Jalland, a High Church Anglican who had considerable sympathy with Roman Catholicism, nevertheless quotes Salvian (from the latter's *On the Government of God*), a presbyter ('priest') from Marseilles at the same period, for a contrasting view of Rome:

[In the Empire] the poor were plundered, the widows in misery, the orphans trampled under foot, so that many of them, and those of high birth and liberal education, fled to the enemy, lest they should fall victims of imperial persecution. They sought Roman humanity among the barbarians, because they could not endure barbarian inhumanity among the Romans. And though they differed from those to whom they fled in manners and speech, and were repelled ... by the smell of the barbarians' bodies and of their clothes, yet they preferred to put up with different ways among the barbarians than with the injustice which is in fashion among the Romans.

In the midst of disorder, Leo pursued a policy of vigorous centralised government to strengthen the Church. Convinced of the supremacy of the Roman see¹⁵ over the (whole) Church, his practical policy was to press claims of jurisdiction over

¹³ 1941; London / S.P.C.K, New York / Macmillan; p2. A view inherited by many who have approved of Christendom – and some who haven't.

¹⁴ p243

¹⁵ A 'see' is what is entrusted to a bishop or archbishop – and not just the diocese or dioceses for which he has responsibility.

the Church in Gaul [France], Spain, and Africa. Indeed, the Western emperor Valentinian III – whose political position wasn't as weak as it might have been – granted Leo a 'rescript' [an official edict], asserting papal jurisdiction over all the Western provinces. Leo had convinced himself that when he spoke, actually it was St Peter speaking through him – and that his hearers and readers should receive his words as Peter's. Moreover, as pope, he inherited all of Peter's authority – Christ having given into Peter's care the 'keys of the Kingdom' (Matt 16:19).

To the Council of Chalcedon (in the Eastern Empire), in 451, Leo sent an account of his own theological understanding of the relevant issues, his *Tome*, telling the assembled bishops (virtually every one Eastern) to receive it humbly as though from St Peter himself. This they very firmly declined to do. Even so, accepting it in its entirety, they announced that their scrutiny of it had confirmed its orthodoxy – diplomatically recognising the *Tome's* words as worthy of Peter. In fact, Leo's thinking on Christology [about who Christ really is] neatly answered the points dividing the Eastern Church at the time – and so was most welcome. The *Tome* greatly increased his prestige – and was the first time the East had taken Western theological thinking seriously. In fact, Leo's ideas weren't quite as well-developed as they needed to be – as subsequent disputes would demonstrate. Of course, after the Council, Leo asserted that its conclusions couldn't be revised – because they'd received papal ratification (!).

In practice, though, it was the attitude of the Emperor in the East that was all-important, as Leo well knew. Seeking to influence a new Eastern Emperor, and flattering him to gain his support for the *Tome*, he told him: 'by the Holy Spirit's inspiration the emperor needs no human instruction and is incapable of doctrinal error'. A serious hostage to fortune this, and with great implications for the future. So when in 482 the Eastern Emperor Zeno sponsored – in his own name (though it had been written by others) – a theological formula, the *Henoticon* (at variance with the position taken in the *Tome*), to secure unity between warring theological

factions in his part of the Empire, what could the papacy say? Leo, for all his brilliance, had undermined the papacy's own fundamental claims (his only significant 'false move', it would appear) – and unintentionally given monarchs who could claim their rule to be over an 'empire', like England's Henry VIII, a precedent for any religious changes they cared to impose on their own authority.¹⁶

Despite this, overall Leo had achieved almost everything he could have hoped for. Moreover he was impressive as a man and as a Christian. He cared for the poor. He was strongly against wrong worship and heretical belief. And, as the most eminent citizen of Rome, he served his city with distinction. In 452, when the savage and bad-tempered Hun commander, Attila, and his army started moving towards Rome, Leo went to meet him. What transpired between them isn't known, but somehow Attila was persuaded to withdraw. Again, in 455, the city was threatened by the Vandal commander Gaiseric, who'd crossed over from Africa with his army. (The Vandals were a Germanic people, and had moved through France a Spain to take North Africa, before they'd launched an attempt on Rome). Brutal and rapacious, the Vandals weren't so easily put off as the Huns – but Leo, by the force of his pleading for the city, managed to encourage them to moderate their worst excesses; and Rome survived to live on into the future. By what Leo managed to achieve, the papacy began to be recognised as a significant – and possibly even decisive – factor in European affairs. And Leo wasn't the only Catholic leader, by any means, to make such an impression. The Catholic Church was becoming not only the Church of Rome – and so of civilisation – but of the barbarian peoples too. Some achievement, this, and not to be underestimated as a factor in the creation of a Christianised Europe.

¹⁶ So from the preamble to Henry VIII's Act of Restraint of Appeals [to the pope in Rome], which refers to various (unnamed) 'old authentic histories and chronicles': 'Where ... it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and has been so accepted in the world, governed by one supreme head and king ... unto whom the body politic ... be bounden and ought to bear, next to God, a natural and humble obedience.' Complete nonsense, of course – but it enabled Henry henceforward to operate according to Leo's ill-chosen words of support for the Eastern Emperor's theological infallibility.

GREGORY I Part of the reason the papacy was able to develop into the future lay in its link with Benedictine monasticism. In particular, the fact that the aristocratic, and properly Roman, young man who would become Gregory the Great decided to become a Benedictine monk proved decisive. Gregory grew up in an age when the Eastern Emperor Justinian was prosecuting all-out war against the Goths in Italy in an attempt – only temporarily successful – to re-establish a united Roman Empire in its original form. The result in Italy was utter devastation. And then in 568, just fourteen years after the end of the Gothic War, another Germanic people, the Lombards invaded. Neither the imperial forces nor the Lombards could get the upper hand. To Gregory, the end of the world seemed to be at hand. He sold his vast estates, and gave the proceeds to the poor. After which he established six monasteries in Sicily and one in Rome, St Andrew's – the last of which he entered as a monk in c.574. Only some four years later, Pope Pelagius II sent him to represent the Catholic Church in Constantinople. When he returned in c.585, it was to become abbot of his old monastery. Finding himself elected pope, he really struggled with the idea. On his accession, he found Italy in a desperate state. Gregory has enjoyed considerable respect from subsequent generations. The following is the entry for him in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*:

The land was devastated by inundations, famine, pestilence, and the invasion of the Lombards, and the position of the Church threatened by the Imperial power at Constantinople. It was owing to Gregory, in whom firmness and strength of character were tempered by gentleness and charity, that many of these evils were conquered. Of particular significance were his relations with the Lombards, with whom he concluded, in 592-3, what amounted to a separate peace. By this unprecedented step he set aside the authority of ... the Emperor's representative [the Emperor being located far away in the East, in Constantinople]. Throughout this period of unrest, aggravated by the weakness and treachery of the Byzantine authorities, he followed a course of independent action, appointing governors to the Italian cities and providing war materials, and thus establishing the temporal power of the Papacy. In his administration of the vast estates of the Church, in which he spent vast sums on works of charity, he showed conspicuous ability.

As well as in Italy, he intervened to considerable effect in England (sending St Augustine of Canterbury, along with 40 missionaries from his own monastery), Spain and Gaul. Highly pastoral in his ministry, he wrote many practical books to build up the Church – indeed, King Alfred of Wessex saw fit to translate his book of directives for bishops for the benefit of the English Church. Gregory was an enthusiastic promoter of monasticism – and granted monks exemptions from the normal oversight of the bishops in whose areas they found themselves. He made at least some contribution to the development of liturgical music. The form of plainsong known as ‘Gregorian Chant’ is named after him. It seems surprising that the life and work of so humble a man should have established in the popular mind the idea that the Papacy was the supreme authority in the Church. He signed himself ‘Servant of the servants of God’ – and meant it. All the popes who have followed him have styled themselves in the same way. If very few of them have been able to be what they’ve said of themselves that they were, that is no fault of Gregory’s.

A barbarian future?

To go back to Theodoric, what was an Ostrogothic (eastern Goth) ruler in Italy like him, a ‘barbarian’, doing employing Latin-speaking intellectuals to run a Roman-type administration? Well, as Diocletian, the barbarian general serving in the Roman army, had shown when he came to power, barbarians could value and embrace Rome’s traditions – even enforce them.

In the later Empire, particular barbarian tribes had been recruited to do tasks the Romans could, or would, no longer do for themselves – like defending the Empire’s extensive and troublesome borders. Diocletian and his colleagues, and then Constantine, showed just how effective such people could be. These barbarians came to be part of the system – much in the same way that immigrants do in the United States today. But other barbarians also wanted what

the Roman Empire had. 'Barbarian' they may have appeared to the Romans, but *Romanitas* – Roman-ness – was what many of them aspired to. *Romanitas* was as appealing then as the American culture is to so much of the world today. Theodoric the Ostrogoth was simply demonstrating the truth of this.

CONVERSION This aspiration had the most profound consequences. The Romans in the West had Catholicism as their version of Christianity. The Germanic peoples, when they came, were either Arian Christians or pagan. The apostle to these Germanic peoples had been Ulfilas (c311-83). Part Greek and part Goth, his Greek parent was Christian. In 341, the bi-lingual Ulfilas, part of a deputation of Goths to Constantinople, was made a missionary bishop to his people. But Ulfilas was an Arian – not an 'orthodox' believer, as the Orthodox or the Catholic parts of the Church would have understood that.¹⁷ As well as being a particularly successful missionary, he managed the extraordinary achievement of creating the written Gothic language – by inventing its alphabet – and then translating the Greek Bible into Gothic. So the Goths – very significant in Europe's formation – came into what had been the Western Empire as a people prepared. In the case of the Visigoths (western Goths), who overran southern France and Spain, they arrived hostile to Catholic Christianity. Indeed, the only factor which seems to have prevented them from intermixing with the existing population seems to have been their adherence to Arianism. Now Arians tended to be much more tolerant towards Catholics than the Catholics were towards them. But in Spain the Visigoths themselves became persecutors. That couldn't save Arianism, though. Catholicism was culturally, intellectually, and spiritually stronger than its Arian rival – and, anyway, Catholic bishops represented the *Romanitas* and continuity that impressed the Goths. Visigothic Spain came to an end after little more than a hundred years, when the new king Reccared announced his conversion to Catholicism in 587.

¹⁷ The main issue here, as already mentioned, was the understanding of the person of Christ – a bit like the difference between Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Christians today, say.

Catholic Christianity itself was as well able to convert people from paganism as from other versions of Christianity to Catholicism. England is as good example as any. After facing down the Celtic Church, which had been doing a heroic job converting the Anglo-Saxons¹⁸ – a case of the abuse of spiritual power? – the Catholic mission from Rome soon showed it could bring to birth a vigorous indigenous missionary force in England (from 597). Systematically, over the years, England came to be Christianised.

THE IRISH CONTRIBUTION The Celtic missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons had been part of an extraordinary push out of Ireland. Irish Christianity was notable for two related characteristics, apart from its scholarship. It had inherited and/or developed a highly ascetic form of monasticism, with prolonged total fasts, self-flagellation, and other severe disciplines. The Rule of St Columbanus gives some flavour of what monks had to endure:

He who fails to say grace at table or to answer 'Amen' will be punished with six blows

A monk who coughs while chanting the beginning of a Psalm will be punished with six blows ... He who receives the blessed bread with unclean hands, twelve blows. If a monk comes late to prayers, fifty lashes ...

And so on. It's hard to know how to assess such a regime. Clearly it produced results. On the other hand, how in line with New Testament discipleship was this highly ascetic way of life? The second of the characteristics was a particularly Irish penance known as the Pilgrimage for Christ. In this, monks would leave the security of their monastery for exile in distant places amongst strange peoples – even where there were no people at all. They didn't actually go as missionaries, but that was the role they often played. For some 25 years before his death in

¹⁸ Ironically, it was the Celtic British Church that had first frustrated Irish efforts to evangelise the Anglo-Saxons. Chadwick, *Early Church*, p64: 'The heathen Saxons were much resented by the native Britons who did little or nothing about evangelizing them ... St Patrick complained that his Irish labours were undermined by hostile British clergy, and had to write a formal protest to Coroticus ..., whose soldiers had carried off his newly baptized converts to be sold as slaves.'

615, Columbanus, from Bangor in Ulster, travelled into France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy (as we would know these places today), establishing influential monasteries, which then spawned daughter monasteries – and met many bishops and kings on his journeys. Again, extraordinary fruitful – but what is one to make of penance as the basic impulse to mission?

A further characteristic of Irish monastic Christianity has already been mentioned – the place of academic learning. The title of Thomas Cahill's book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*¹⁹ – even if a slight exaggeration – says it all. From the blurb on the dustcover: 'Not only did Irish monks and scribes maintain the very record of civilization – copying the manuscripts of both pagan and Christian writers including Homer, Virgil, Plato and Aristotle, while libraries on the continent were forever lost – they brought their uniquely Irish view of the world to the task ... So much of the liveliness we associate with the Middle Ages has its roots in Ireland because that is where the seeds of European culture were germinated anew.'

The Celts – we Celts – are, as a people, given to inspiration, pioneering and heroics. What we are not so good at is the systematic and the long-term – not in such a way as to ensure survival into the distant future of whatever it is that we turn our hands to, anyway. That affected Celtic Christianity. The Roman tradition, by contrast, and Catholicism after it, built durability into what they did (compare Constantine's currency reform and his civil service – each good for a millennium). So, a hundred or so years after Columbanus, Boniface, 'apostle of Germany', a west Saxon [i.e. English] missionary to the east Saxons in Germany, found he needed to reform and renew old Celtic monasteries in his area of operations (as well as believing he needed to bring them into line with Roman practice)²⁰. Celtic Christianity was in many ways healthier than its Roman counterpart – but Catholicism possessed more staying power.

¹⁹ 1995; London; Hodder and Stoughton; ISBN 0 340 63786 2.

²⁰ See J.C. Sladden, *Boniface of Devon: Apostle of Germany*, 1980; Exeter; ISBN 0-85324-275-3.

Sinister developments

INAPPROPRIATE ACTION AGAINST HERESY Even before Augustine of Hippo had begun to advocate coercion against dissenting believers, the case of the Spanish layman, Priscillian, had aroused concern. Around 380, Priscillian, some whose beliefs were clearly unorthodox, was denounced as a Manichee. Nevertheless, within a year his friends had had him installed as bishop of Avila. Shortly afterwards, his enemies managed to secure from the secular authorities a decree of exile against him and his followers. The exiles went initially to the south of France, from where they moved on to Rome. Neither Pope Damasus in Rome nor Bishop Ambrose in Milan would give them a hearing. They did persuade the secular authorities to annul the decree of exile, though – and returned to Spain, where they soon attracted a large following. Soon afterwards, the new Emperor, Maximus, in attempt to gain the bishops' support, had Priscillian tried at an Episcopal synod at Bordeaux. But Priscillian, refusing to recognise the synod's competence to adjudicate his case, appealed to the Emperor. At this point his enemies brought a new charge against him, that of witchcraft – a capital offence. Despite the strong protests of Bishop Martin of Tours, he and some of his followers were convicted and executed. Although these executions had been inflicted by the secular authority (the prefect) and not an ecclesiastical court, it was obvious to all that the state had acted at the Church's bidding.

ANTI-SEMITISM Spain also produced another foretaste of what was going to become all too common later on. This from F. Donald Logan:

... at the Third Council of Toledo (589) Catholicism became the official religion of the Visigothic state. Although some Arians refused conversion, the Visigoths, in general, quickly adopted the Catholic faith. An aspect of Visigothic rule that was perhaps not a precedent strictly speaking was the treatment of the Jews, which reminds one of a later chapter in Spanish history. King Sisebut (612-20) gave the Jews the choice between baptism and banishment. Those who remained – the banished fled to Gaul – constituted a majority of the Jews, and they became the first in a long line of

crypto-Jews. The scholarly bishop of Seville, Isidore, opposed this order and, with other bishops, succeeded in having it overturned at the Fourth Council of Toledo (633). The effect was only temporary: subsequent councils of Toledo (notably the Sixth in 638 and the Eighth in 653) renewed anti-Jewish canons.²¹

In the first example, that of Priscillian, the Gentile Church was acting inappropriately against its own – even granted that action of some sort was needed. In the second, it persecuted not just a dissenting minority, but that dissenting minority that was the God of the Gentiles' original people, the Jews – who were merely seeking to live among the Gentiles according to the original covenant God had given them. This may have been the work of the over-zealous king of a people newly-converted to Catholicism – but the primary responsibility was the Church's. Doubtless the Visigoths had their own hostility to the Jews. Even so, a tradition down Gentile church history of anti-semitic attitudes virtually ensured behaviour of such a kind sooner or later.

CRUSADING BEFORE THE CRUSADES R.H.C. Davis cites an example of things to come from France: 'An ominous precedent occurred in 507 when the Franks, with the enthusiastic support of the Gallo-Roman Catholics, had defeated the [Arian] Visigoths at Vouillé and annexed Aquitaine. One bishop wrote to Clovis, King of the Franks, urging him to 'spread the light' of his new faith to the nations about him. "Where *you* fight", he wrote, "*we* conquer."²²

In such ways as these the growing influence of the dark side of the Roman spirit within the Church manifested itself. If a Roman spiritual virus had already become well established in the Church before the Romanised barbarian Constantine's time, that emperor caused the condition to become much more deep-seated. In his case maybe he can be excused, on the ground of not knowing what he was doing. In a later generation, though, St Ambrose, the cultivated Roman secular-leader-turned-bishop knowingly chose the bullying

²¹ *The Church in the Middle Ages*, p22. 'Canons', in this context, are church rules and laws.

²² *A History of Medieval Europe*, p48.

ways of Rome in preference to the gentler ones of the Gospel. And Augustine, as we've seen, followed his teacher's unhappy example. For Leo, Rome was to be celebrated – and deliberately, and in a very formal way, he took upon himself, and the Church he led, the utterly inappropriate mantle of that Empire. What was happening was that the Church was becoming increasingly demonised – by which I mean the institutional church structure was being invaded by evil spirits attaching to an older, and explicitly pagan, imperial structure. The consequences of such a process were only too predictable.

Evangelisation

The conversion of England by the Catholics provides as good an example as any of what Catholic evangelisation could be like. In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* he reports Pope Gregory's concern at the great number of miracles performed by Augustine of Canterbury – and quotes from Gregory's letter to Augustine on the matter: 'I know, most loving brother, that Almighty God, by means of your affection, shows great miracles in the nation which He has chosen. So it is necessary that you rejoice with fear, and tremble whilst you rejoice ... lest, amidst the wonders that are performed, [your] weak mind may be puffed up in its own presumption ...' And he goes on to remind him of the disciples returning to Jesus, and being told, "Do not rejoice on this account, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Gregory's letters of advice often manifest pastoral wisdom of the highest order. But the point here is his incidental witness to the miraculous – to a degree that clearly surprises Gregory.²³

Bede reproduces a letter from Gregory to Abbot Mellitus, as the latter prepared to enter Britain. It concerns evangelistic strategy, about which Augustine is to be briefed:

²³ bk 1; ch 31. The Celtic Church – particularly the Irish monastic community – was also known for its wonder-working. Bede, although a convinced Catholic, seems to have been rather more impressed by the character of the Irish monks whom Augustine and his team displaced than by those who displaced them.

... I have, upon mature deliberation about the English situation, determined ... that the temples of idols in that nation should not be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in these temples, let altars be erected and relics placed in them. If these temples are well built, it is necessary that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God – so that the people, when they see their temples standing there much as before, may rid themselves of the error they have harboured in their hearts and, now knowing and adoring the true God may more naturally attend the places where they have been accustomed to worship. And since they have been accustomed to sacrificing many oxen to demons, some other solemn activity needs to be substituted in place of that ... They are no longer to sacrifice animals to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God ... If people are allowed some worldly pleasures ... they will come the more readily to desire the joys of the spirit. It is impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at a stroke; and whoever wishes to climb a mountaintop will climb step by step.²⁴

Today, even among evangelicals, a process view of conversion has tended to gain favour over the idea of crisis-experience conversion. Even so, the assertion Gregory made, that ‘it is impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at a stroke’, invites challenge. There’s a sense in which what he says has to be true: however dramatic a person’s conversion, their longings, habits, weaknesses and sin-patterns don’t change overnight. An evangelical/Pentecostal chorus that springs to mind testifies as much: ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace’. But some evangelical and Pentecostal conversions always have been sudden and dramatic. Frankly, so have some rather more Catholic ones. And accounts in Scripture of the conversions such people as the Philippian jailer, and the Gerasene (or Gadarene) man possessed by a legion of demons, suggest that we ought to look for rapid, and fairly thoroughgoing, conversion as the norm.

²⁴ bk.1; ch 30

I don't, at this point, intend to challenge the Catholic practice described here in any detail – although it wouldn't be my own, and I have the usual evangelical objections. But three general – and related – reservations concerning this approach come to mind. The first involves the frequent failure of the process to go to term: a few individuals do indeed reach the stage of radical discipleship, but far too many seem to be still-born, or stuck in immaturity. The second relates to the consequences of that failure. Initiation into the Christian faith which doesn't go to completion generates serious spiritual problems. In Mt 12:43-45 we're told about how a house (person's life) swept clean (delivered of evil spirits) and left unoccupied (not filled instead with the Holy Spirit) leads to a more demonised state than at the beginning (the time of 'conversion'). Nominalism and immature versions of Christianity have always been damaging to the people concerned – think of the penalty for 'lukewarmness', Rev 3:16 – to the Church, and to the community and nation they belong to. The record of the Christianisation of a place like England shows that pagan practices continued to be ingrained in the people for centuries, and how, in parallel with this, the generality of Anglo-Saxon behaviour went on being thoroughly degenerate. Thirdly, the Church ends up with all sorts of transitional practices which are, at best, profoundly unhelpful – when the challenge is to have new wineskins for the new wine of the Kingdom. The ancient forms of Christianity are riddled with such unhelpful – and often obligatory – practices.

Gregory the Great is remembered for his integrity and wisdom. Later Catholic popes and bishops have rarely matched his example. The results have often been woeful. For instance, the Catholic Church in parts of South America (a classic case) has been frequently – and justifiably – accused of having tolerated, and sometimes even encouraged, the marrying of what was Catholic with what was explicitly pagan: syncretism. And widespread Catholic carelessness and naivety have ensured the unintentional creation of pagan-Catholic hybrids across the planet. (This isn't just a Catholic problem. What was Lutheranism doing, for

example, when it cooperated to the extent it did with Hitler? Or Russian Orthodoxy with Marxism?)

I said above that the Catholic Church 'Christianised' England – not using that term in a particularly hostile sense. The fact is, though, that England was only very partially 'converted', as such. If the Celtic Church hadn't been pushed to one side, a much more radical conversion would likely have taken place. It's hard not to be grateful for what the Catholic Church did for us here: covering the nation with parish churches and monastic houses; giving us a Catholic-Christian worldview in place of the pagan-Saxon one; and providing a form of Christianity that could stay the course over centuries. But the failure of the Roman Church to cooperate with Celtic Christianity, though, not only betrayed the arrogance of the Roman spirit within Catholicism, it inflicted a wound that has yet to be healed. And no country needs its Christianity corrupted with the Roman spiritual 'virus' – one which seems difficult indeed to be rid of. There was another problem. Bede, in his account of the 'conversion' of Kent (the south-east corner of England), tells us that after king, Ethelbert, was won over (597), although there was no compulsion many of his subjects converted 'through fear of the king or to win his favour'. Not a healthy state of affairs – and one that would grow worse.

There is a fashion for implying: Celtic Christianity good, Constantine and Rome a disaster. In my view, a Celtic myth gets pitted against a Roman one here. Constantine never did what he was supposed to have done – impose Christianity on unwilling subjects. But that's what tended to happen in the case of the various Germanic peoples who took over Europe. What suppressed the Celtic contribution was much more the Germanic affinity for Roman ways than any direct action against the Celtic Church.

THE CHURCH'S YEAR In an attempt to keep nominal and weak believers from paganism, a major element in the Roman Church's strategy involved developing the 'Christian Calendar'. This demanding programme invented

Christian festivals for all the pagan ones. The most threatening pagan activities were 'covered' by 'holy days of obligation'; i.e. there was no time for involvement in them, because Christians were required to be at church for the substitute activities instead. Religion, rather than true spiritual discipleship.

The cult of the saints

In his instructions to the mission to England, Gregory said that relics should be placed in pagan temples that were being 'cleaned out' and turned into churches. By 'relics' he meant the bodies of saints, or of items associated with them, or fragments of these. A vast (international) trade in such relics developed during the Middle Ages, and the minutest fragments could be regarded as being of great value. In due course, both theft and fraud became significant problems.

The attraction was the spiritual power believed to be associated with them – virtually magical power. The 'authentic' cult of the saints started with those martyred for their faith. The anniversaries of their deaths came to be remembered at their graves. It was believed that, if salvation was achieved by taking up one's cross and following Christ (rather than by faith appropriating the free gift of Christ's dying for our sins, in our place – see start of chapter 7), then those who died for their faith would go immediately into the Lord's presence. The next step was to regard the graves of the martyrs as open windows to heaven, as it were. Where better, then, to meet with the Lord than at the martyrs' graves?

Now, for hygiene reasons, all resting places for the dead, in the ancient world, were situated outside the city walls. But Christians, at the time power and influence were coming their way, had started to think of their dead in a very different way to the rest of the community. Graves, for them were now places of healing (and other answers to prayer), not health hazards. Part of the Christendom revolution was the establishing of graves right in the centre of the city – and the bringing in of old human remains from outside the walls. The most

appropriate place for worship was reckoned to be the resting place of a saint (or saints). So, start with that, and erect a church building around it (them). Then have burial places within the building, next to the holy remains, for the most 'significant' members of the Christian community – and establish a graveyard around the building so that the less privileged among the faithful may rest not far away from the holy remains too. According to such thinking, all the baptised worship, and are laid to rest, at the doorway to heaven. But, more than this, the martyr or saint, the 'friend of God', is able and willing to intercede in heaven on behalf of those who come near him/her.

Gregory clearly didn't doubt the spiritual power and effectiveness of such an arrangement. But the question has to be asked: assuming that there really is power in all this, what power is it? The assumption about there being real power is worth making. Consider the words of the inscription on the tomb of St Martin of Tours, who was mentioned above in relation to Priscillian: 'Here lies Martin the bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God; but he is fully here, present and made manifest in miracles of every kind.' Perhaps the power associated with relics has been sometimes holy and sometimes demonic. There are two particular reasons for suspecting at least some element of demonic power. First, a kind of ancestor-worship was prevalent in areas such as North Africa – where the cult first grew powerful – which involved communing with the dead at their graves. And, secondly, the only way to succeed in life, for many in the Roman Empire (such as Augustine of Hippo), was to gain for oneself a patron. It didn't take much to see a 'saint' as being in an ideal position to play the role of spiritual patron for those who sought his/her help. The use of the term 'patron saint', for parish churches and whatever, is evidence enough that saints have been seen as spirit-patrons. There is something very strange going on here, and we're justified in being suspicious. The burden of proof seems to be on those who would argue for any truly holy power being associated with this cult. Could there be? Yes, because motive is an important factor in any Christian

activity. If – a big if, maybe – the primary motive is to seek God, the questionable validity of the means will be overshadowed by the rightness of the intention.

Both the cult of the saints, in general, and that of Mary, in particular, are fundamental in any attempt to understand the Christendom Church.

The formation of Christian nations

'Poor, nasty, brutish and short' was how Thomas Hobbes in his political treatise *Leviathan* described a certain kind of life in which there was no culture and, far worse than that, constant fear and the danger of violent death. That, for too many people, too much of the time, was the way things were in the earlier Middle Ages.

A helpful first step after the Germanic invasions was when these peoples were able to settle down and start the process of nation-building. A prerequisite for some degree of civilised order was the drawing up of an appropriate law code. Much the same process seems to have taken place in many of the new nations. The invaders would come with their own customs and practices. But they didn't have the regions they overran all to themselves – there would also be the existing populations, which had been used to living under Roman law. In the beginning, the invaders would live by their own rules, and they'd leave the original residents to observe the law they were accustomed to. But as the invaders' Arianism or paganism was replaced by Catholicism, and the rulers wanted a united kingdom, so a new kind of law emerged, composed of the three elements: Germanic custom, Roman law, and Catholic canon (church) law. What is happening in Europe today is that this third element is now being removed.

THE CONVERSION OF THE FRANKS Any attempt to understand the development of Christendom and of the Western World needs to take due account of the significance of Frankish history – in effect, the history of the French nation and of France (although this is to over-simplify).

Around 496, some time after taking a Catholic as his wife, Clovis, king of the Franks had a battlefield conversion reminiscent of Constantine's. He too embraced Catholicism. How 'Christian' he ever became is debated – he certainly didn't become significantly less violent. But he and the Frankish kings who followed him proved thoroughly committed to the Catholic cause. They both promoted it amongst their own people, and opposed Catholicism's rivals and enemies: Arianism, paganism, and, when it came, Islam. Traditional wars of aggression became for them holy wars. St Columbanus, the Irish missionary, offended the Frankish leaders considerably – by condemning their lax morality. Over time, these Merovingian kings (as they were known) grew ever weaker, but their 'prime ministers' (whose title was 'mayor of the palace') showed themselves capable of playing the royal role.

These men came to the height of their powers just as the popes needed the help of a strong and reliable secular power. If the Merovingian kings had strengthened their position, early on, through becoming Catholic, the readiness of their 'prime ministers' to offer military support to the papacy, when its vital interests were threatened by the Lombards in Italy, made them and the people over whom they ruled indispensable. The popes needed the Frankish 'prime ministers' – but these 'mayors of the palace', in turn, needed the popes. Because what they wanted was to be recognised as kings in place of the Merovingians who were, in theory (though not in practice), their masters. Only a pope could give them that kind of legitimacy.

The 'prime ministers' became dominant in the time of Charles Martel, who turned back the invading Muslim Arabs at Tours in 732. The truly-saintly St Boniface, 'apostle of Germany', said his mission to the German Saxons could never have succeeded without Charles's help. The latter seems to have been a good man, and sympathetic towards a healthy form of Catholicism, such as Boniface was committed to. In 750, seemingly with Boniface's blessing, Pepin the Short,

Martel's son and successor, sounded Pope Zacharias out about being recognised as the Franks' true king. Pepin's question to the pope was 'whether it was just for one person to reign and for another (merely) to rule'. The pope's answer, when it came, was that 'it is better that he who has the power should be king, rather than he who lacks kingly power'. So, late the next year, after Pepin had been elected by the Frankish nobles to be their king, Boniface – in effect the Franks' archbishop – and some of the Frankish bishops consecrated Pepin with oil to make him king – in a ceremony that took its inspiration from the anointing of Saul and David in the Old Testament. (This was destined to become the model of European coronations down to the present day). Note, in passing, the pope's opting for the practical power of Pepin rather than the 'spiritual authority' (as some would see it) of Chideric III, the last Merovingian king, whom he declared deposed. Not that popes tended to let their own position be so assessed!

The Franks were becoming the decisive power in Europe – militarily and economically. In the most difficult and unstable of times, they were able to impose their will; and prosperity in the West was migrating from the Mediterranean up into northern Europe because of their success. Three years later, in 754, the new Pope Stephen II saw fit to repeat the act of consecrating Pepin in person. At the time, the Lombards were terrorising Rome. J.M. Roberts comments: 'The papacy drew a dividend almost at once on its investment. Pepin defeated the Lombards and in 756 "granted" imperial Ravenna (in theory the Western capital of the continuing Roman Empire, based in Constantinople) "to St Peter". This was the origin of what were later known as the "Papal States", the beginning of 1,100 years of the Temporal Power enjoyed by the pope over his own dominions as a ruler like other rulers, and a new basis for papal independence.'²⁵

BONIFACE At this point it's worth saying something about Boniface. Without apostles like him and (the rather earlier) Columbanus, Christian Europe could

²⁵ *A History of Europe*, p109.

never have been constructed. Wynfrith, as Boniface was originally called, was born in Crediton, in the south-west corner of England in 680. He grew up just on the Saxon side of the disputed border between the English West Saxons and the Cornish Celts. In his world, the Celts were regarded as not only holding unorthodox Christian beliefs, but as being the enemy militarily. His parents were in the habit of entertaining the monks from nearby Exeter who came to bring church, as it were, to the Crediton outpost. Young Boniface heard his own call to the religious life and, despite his parents' opposition, joined the Exeter monastery. But he was so gifted intellectually that the normal rules had to be overridden, to allow him to be transferred to the monastery at Nursling, between Winchester and Southampton. Having now the opportunity he needed to develop, he became not only the star of his monastery, but renowned throughout the whole kingdom of Wessex. The abbot and his fellow monks were stunned when Boniface announced, aged 35, that he had a missionary call. Eventually they recognised the truth of this, and released him to pursue it.

He and the team he took with him intended to help Willibrord, a monk from Northumbria and by now the 'apostle of Frisia [northern Holland]'; and later to push on south-east from there to evangelise the East Saxons [of Germany]. This was in 716, but two years earlier the Frisian leader Radbod had reverted to paganism, and devastated the Christian mission to his people. Even so, the capable and dedicated Willibrord stuck at the work amongst the Frisians where he could. When Boniface showed up, though, Radbod seems to have been impressed enough by him to let him evangelise the Frisian people. The fruits of his efforts at this time, though, proved minimal. At the end of his life, 'in retirement', Boniface would return to his old work in Frisia – and die a martyr.

After two years he went to ask the pope for a missionary commission 'to Germany' [as we might put it]. This was granted, and in 719 he saw great success in Bavaria and the area around Erfurt. Protection was afforded to him and his team, where possible, by the Frankish rulers – who had nominal control

of his area of operation. After being summoned to Rome to give account of his reported successes, Boniface realised the time had come to 'take on' the old heathen gods – not least so that converts would be able to break free from their power. The crunch came around 725, when to prevent the sacrifice of a child at the sacred oak tree at Geismar, dedicated to Thor, the god of thunder, he decided to fell it. In front of cursing pagans, so the story goes, he struck a first blow against its trunk. Suddenly a strong wind blew up, and toppled the tree. No longer would he be regarded as 'the enemy of the gods'. Legend also has it that Boniface subsequently used a fir tree as a teaching aid – using its triangular shape to explain the Trinity. The origin of our Christmas tree? Possibly. We'll never know for sure, but that's the legend.

In the face of enormous difficulties, Boniface established a viable Church for Germany, using both monastery and diocese as basic units – and keeping them related to one another. The popes who'd commissioned him, and whom he served so faithfully, failed to understand the way things were in Germany or what he was up against. But he never quit. After the death of Charles Martel, he was authorised to oversee the reform of the Frankish Church (740s). From a more general – as well as a Catholic – perspective, this reform succeeded.

But, towards the end of his life, this spreader of papal influence north of the Alps came to have real reservations about papal control of the Church's ministry. They arose from the clash between what he knew was needed and the inappropriate orders and restrictions he, as an older and exceptionally experienced apostle, found himself subject to.

THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

A brief account has already been given in chapter 1 of how the Frankish king Pepin's son Charles (Charlemagne) was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in St Peter's, Rome, by the pope on Christmas Day, 800. Charlemagne proved himself

a thoroughly Christendom version of Constantine – that is, very much like him, but more extreme; adding, as he did, Ambrose’s and Augustine’s inappropriate ideas to Constantine’s – much more modest – approach to things.

Charlemagne’s fundamental aims, when he inherited the throne in 775, were twofold. He wanted to unite all the Germanic peoples into one kingdom; his own. And, secondly, he wanted to convert all those over whom he ruled, and that he conquered, to Christianity. Not surprisingly, his highly-effective armies were involved in almost constant warfare. By 800 he controlled all of modern France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, almost all of Germany and large areas of Italy and Spain. What, unlike Constantine, he didn’t do was to develop governmental and administrative systems which could keep all this united. He was too much the traditional warrior for that.

Though he could neither read nor write, he brought the monk-scholar Alcuin, originally from York, to his court at Aachen as his religious and educational adviser. ‘It was the largest educational opportunity ever offered to an Englishman,’ says David L Edwards, ‘for it gave him the leading position in the whole revival of religion and learning as Charlemagne struggled to recreate the empire and civilization of Rome.’²⁶ So began a period which has come to be known as the *Carolingian Renaissance* – ‘Carolingian’, because this is what the line of Frankish kings beginning with Pepin the Short came to be known as; ‘Renaissance’ [‘rebirth’] because this was a most profound cultural rebirth. Major advances were made in literature, the arts, architecture, law, liturgical worship, and biblical studies. The efforts of such men as Boethius, Cassiodorus, and Isidore were made to benefit the emerging Europe. Education was made a priority; and besides important legal reforms, there were also vital economic ones – not least the standardisation of currency. The chaotic and insecure Dark Ages

²⁶ *Christian England: Its Story to The Reformation*; 1981; London; Collins; ISBN 0 00 215212 6; p84.

were giving way to the much more constructive Later Middle Ages. European and Western civilisation was coming into existence.

Nothing excuses Charlemagne's excesses – such as his forced conversion of the East Saxons, the disastrous consequences of which have reverberated down to the present day. But, to the extent to which individuals and events are significant in history, he has to count as a key player, who used existing ways and inherited materials to launch the European project and the Western world – no less. With him, too, Christendom was relaunched.