

FOUNDED UPON THE ROCK: PART II  
THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE BARBARIAN NATIONS: THE LATE CLASSICAL ERA

I. The persecutions of the Roman era ended and the Christian era of the Empire began with the Emperor Constantine. From this point on, the Empire, both East and West, usually supported Christianity in principle, but often tried to dominate the Church as well.

A. The Emperor Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two parts, east and west, with the Western Roman Empire being ruled from Rome. He also arranged a system such that, in each half of the Roman Empire, there would be an Emperor (called Augustus) and a sort of vice-emperor called the Caesar. When the Emperor died or retired, the Caesar would become Emperor. Then Diocletian and the Western Emperor Maximilian retired and their successors Galerius and Severus died shortly thereafter. These deaths set off a power struggle because the Senate and the armies also wanted roles in the succession.

B. Constantius was the general of Rome's army in the province of Britain, and eventually became the Caesar. He thus had the right to succeed as Emperor when Severus died; but died shortly after Severus. His son Constantine then became a claimant for the imperial throne in the West, along with Maxentius who was already in Rome. On the night before the decisive battle with Maxentius, Constantine saw a vision of the Cross with the inscription "Under this sign, you will conquer." After winning the battle of Milvian Bridge just outside of Rome, he became Emperor in the West, and got the eastern Emperor Licinius to sign the Edict of Milan, ending the persecutions. Eventually, Constantine would take over the entire Roman Empire.

C. As Emperor, he not only legalized Christianity, but favored the faith, especially with the promotion of Church councils and the building of many churches including the basilicas of Saint Peter and Saint John Lateran in Rome. His mother St. Helen became Christian, travelled to the Holy Land and established churches at the sacred sites associated with the life of Christ. After much effort, she also uncovered the Cross of Jesus.

D. As a result, there were numerous conversions, and Christianity became the most common religion in the Roman Empire. But with those rapid conversions came doctrinal disputes and more struggles with having people who joined the faith actually live it out in practice. In addition, the upper class in the West tended to favor the old paganism.

II. Due to the legalization of Christianity, numerous doctrinal disputes that had already been around came to the surface. The Church thus called seven ecumenical (universal) councils in the next four centuries that would resolve some of these disputes. All Catholics and members of the Orthodox Churches, and most Protestants, consider these councils to be reliable, and in fact crucial,

statements of Christian doctrine. Five of these Councils occurred in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries.

A. The first great council occurred at Nicea in modern day Turkey in 325. That Council defined that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man, in opposition to the Arians, who said that He was man, or even some greater creature, but not God.

1. A priest and monk named Arius was promoting the teaching that Jesus Christ was a model human whose death was redemptive, but that He was not God. This teaching divided many people in the Church, and in fact riots sometimes broke out.

2. The bishop of Alexandria, Egypt called a council of local bishops to condemn this teaching, but that council only had authority in Egypt.

3. Constantine thought it important to resolve the issue and so called bishops to meet in a universal (ecumenical) council.

a. Three hundred bishops met at Nicea in modern day Turkey, with the representatives primarily from the eastern half of the Roman Empire, but also representatives from elsewhere in the Empire and even regions such as Persia and Armenia outside of the Empire. St. Nicholas was one of the bishops present.

b. Pope Sylvester was not there in person, but supported the council and sent his delegate to ensure that the true faith was taught.

c. The bishops took a baptismal creed and revised it to form the most of what is now called the Nicene Creed, which we recite on Sundays. All but 2 of the 300 bishops present signed that document.

B. However, even then disputes soon arose over the interpretation of the statement that Jesus Christ is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

1. Even some of those who initially agreed with the Council of Nicea then took up semi-Arianism, a view that Jesus Christ is very like God, but not God. Constantine’s son, Constantinius tried to force the Church to accept this view when he became sole Emperor after the death of his brother Constans and a two year civil war. Saint Athanasius had been a deacon at the Council of Nicea and then became the Bishop of Alexandria. He was particularly prominent in defending the true faith, both as a bishop and as a theologian, to the point where he is now considered one of the doctors of the Church.

2. Other theologians, such as the Cappadocian Fathers (St. Basil the Great of Alexandria, St. Gregory Nazianzen, the bishop of Constantinople, and St. Gregory of Nyssa) in the east and St. Hilary in the west were also very prominent in defending the true faith in response to semi-Arianism.

3. Constantinius died in 361 and his successor Julian turned out to be a pagan. He unsuccessfully tried to revive paganism, but he fortunately also opposed semi-Arianism because he thought it was the more powerful of the two Christian views. And so the imperial support for semi-Arianism temporarily ended.

4. The dispute continued after Julian's death when the eastern Emperor Valens tried to support semi-Arianism until his death in 378.

C. The controversy required the calling of a second ecumenical council, now at Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 381, that Council reemphasized in stronger terms that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man, equal to the Father in divine nature, and also that the Holy Spirit is true God.

D. But then the controversy arose about how Jesus Christ is true God and true man.

1. Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople proposed that there are two distinct persons, the divine Son of God and the human person Jesus Christ. He thought that they were morally united, but not one person. And thus he taught that Mary is the mother of the human person Jesus Christ, but not of the Son of God.

2. In 431, an ecumenical Council took place in Ephesus in Asia Minor (now Turkey), the city where, according to traditional belief, Mary lived at the end of her life.

3. The Council of Ephesus took up the theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria and defined that the Divine Person, the Son of God, is God from all eternity, but then took up human nature in the Incarnation. Thus, one person, the Son of God, has two natures, human and divine. And Mary is the Mother of God because she is the mother of the Son of God through His human nature.

4. Marian devotion, which had always been in the Church, now became even more prominent. Thus, for example, in 432, after a miraculous appearance of snow in summer, the Church established the basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome.

E. Questions then arose about how the Son of God is also human.

1. During the fifth century, some theologians proposed that Jesus Christ has only one nature, or has two natures but only one will, the divine will. These heresies were called monophysitism and monothelism respectively. Some permutations on this view included the idea that Jesus Christ initially had two natures, but that the first nature was immediately subsumed into the divine nature, or that He has one nature, a mix of human and divine.

2. In response, Pope Leo the Great (430-451) wrote his famous Tome to Flavian. He and bishops of the Church then convoked the Council of Chalcedon in 451. When the Tome to Flavian was read at the council, many people responded, "Peter has spoken through Leo," recognizing that the Pope is the successor to St. Peter. Consistent with the Tome to Flavian, the council defined that one person (the divine Son of God) has two natures (human and divine) and that these two natures are whole and complete, unmixed with each other, but united in the one person.

3. In 553, the Second Council of Constantinople refuted what was called the theopachite view, the idea that all three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, joined in the human nature of Jesus and thus all of them died and rose again. That Council reaffirmed previous Councils and clarified that it was the Son alone who took on human nature and that through His human nature He truly lived on earth, died and rose again.

F. There were other heresies, such as the Pelagians, who maintained that we are saved by faith alone and not by grace, and the Donatists, who believed that only a meritorious clergyman could validly administer the sacraments. While no one Church council was convened to refute these heresies, the Pope, the bishops, local councils would use the writings of the great theologians to formulate true Church teachings in response to them.

III. These doctrinal issues, and the spread of Christianity generally, led to a great age of Christian scholarship in the late classical era. Some of those theologians include:

A. In the West, the greatest theologian of this time was St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), whose writings covered almost every major issue of his day and has played a dominant role in Catholic theology ever since.

1. He was born of a Christian mother Monica and a pagan father in a small town Tagaste in northern Africa. He was raised with a good education and a general knowledge of the faith. But he was not baptized and apparently did not receive good instruction in Christianity. An extraordinarily intelligent youth, he sought to advance in the world through rhetoric and learning. While still in his teens, he rejected Christianity as too simple for him and at first adopted Manicheism, an otherworldly religion that maintains that the spirit is all good and that this material world is evil.

2. Highly skilled in rhetoric, he made his way to Carthage, the most prominent city in central northern Africa, for studies and teaching in rhetoric. Reading the great classical philosophers and writers, especially Cicero, he gradually sought learning and wisdom with greater fervor. He rejected both Manicheism and the epicurean ideal of ease by the age of 20 and instead strove to he was to develop virtue and the pursuit of wisdom. But he was held back by his earthly desires, and especially his concubine.
3. In Rome, he became attracted to Christianity, especially under the influence of St. Ambrose and the prayers of his mother. At one point, in a dramatic conversion, a child (or an angel in the form of a child) told him to open the Bible and read. The passage, Romans 13:13 filled him with a divine light and joy and convinced him to stop putting off conversion and enter the Christian faith. And so, he began preparation and was baptized in 387.
4. At first, he tried to be a monk, but his talents were too great for people to leave him alone. And so he was soon ordained a priest and then, at the age of 41, as bishop of Hippo in Africa. There, he would preside until his death 35 years later.
5. As priest and then bishop, he was central to the great theological debates of the day. Opposing the Donatists, he defended the importance and effectiveness of the sacraments even in the minister was unworthy. Opposing the Pelagians, he emphasized the importance of grace and the sacraments and coined the term "original sin." His explanation of the Trinity and work On Christian Doctrine were immediately classics, and have been central texts to this day. And his work The City of God set forth a Christian view of history.
6. His autobiographical Confessions, perhaps the world's first spiritual autobiography and certainly the inspiration for this genre, has become the classic conversion story to this day.
7. His rule for monks and nuns would come to be adopted by what is now called the Augustinian order, and by later orders such as the Norbitines, who strongly emphasize conversion in one's life.

B. Saint Jerome (c. 340-420) would become the doctor of Scriptural interpretation.

1. Born about 340, he was raised in a Christian family, but only baptized at the age of 18. He received an excellent classical education.
2. After his baptism, he took his faith more seriously and made many friends among monks during his travels. He took up many studies, including that of Hebrew in his travels and was recognized as a first rate genius.
3. For a time, he gave up all secular reading to avoid temptations and focus on theology. Later, he would try to maintain a balance between the sacred and the secular. For most of his later life, he also lived in a cave in Bethlehem, working on

his great translations and commentaries.

4. Starting in 374, he collaborated with Pope St. Damasus to compile a list of the books that would be included in Scriptures, as well as research on the exact text of the books of the Bible.

5. Starting about 380, he worked on his great translation of the Bible into the common Latin language of the people. This translation, called the Vulgate would be the standard until modern times, and is even now very influential in Church translations.

6. He also worked for 30 years on extensive Scriptural translations, which would likewise play a dominant role in Catholic commentaries.

C. Saint Ambrose (340-397), the bishop of Milan, would play a central role in liturgy and Church music, as well as become a model of Church leadership.

1. Ambrose was born into one of the great families of the Roman Empire, with his father being the prefect of Gaul, or modern day France. Although he learned Christianity while young, he was not initially baptized. He received an excellent education and rose to become the mayor of Milan. While mayor, he was in a three year preparation program to become Christian.

2. When the Bishop of Milan died in 373 or 374, there was a great dispute over who should be the next Bishop, and the situation in the cathedral was becoming very tense. However, when Ambrose entered, the people declared that he should be the bishop. And so he received all of the sacraments within weeks, and administered the diocese with extraordinary skill. He even took on the Roman Emperor when he thought the Emperor was in the wrong.

3. St. Ambrose was extraordinarily talented in preaching, and he was the one who taught St. Augustine the Christian faith.

4. St. Ambrose wrote extensively on the liturgy and composed several liturgical hymns, such as the Te Deum, that are sung to this day. There is also the Ambrosian rite, which is used in Milan to this day. He also promoted religious life and consecrated virginity.

5. St. Ambrose was also a master of interpreting Scripture in an allegorical fashion, applying moral lessons to practical life.

D. Saint John Chrysostom (347-407) became the patriarch of Constantinople, the largest city in the Roman world, and a master at moral teaching and preaching, as well as an independent voice in the eastern Roman Empire.

1. He was raised in Antioch by a Christian family, but also not baptized until the age of about 18. Soon after his baptism, he became a monk in Tarsus near Antioch and

spent two years in extensive Scriptural study. He was ordained a deacon after the Council of Constantinople in 381 and a priest in 386.

2. He ministered in Antioch with such great success that the eastern Emperor Arcadius and the people almost universally selected him to be the Bishop of Constantinople in 397.

3. He instituted a massive reform of the Church, emphasizing simplicity of life, prayer and learning.

4. He was also very willing to take on the decadence of society, and especially of the imperial government.

5. As a result of his courage, the Emperor, at the urging of his wife Eudoxia and his main advisor Eutropius forced him into exile twice. He died on the way into the second exile in 407. But his prestige would gain for the Church great influence, especially in opposition to the imperial court.

6. He wrote on numerous topics, especially the moral life. He also emphasized strongly the sacrament of the Eucharist and the real presence of Jesus Christ.

E. Saint Ephraim the deacon (306-373) was a poet who helped, among other things, increase Marian devotion. Because of his beautiful expressions, he is sometimes called “the harp of the Holy Spirit.”

1. He was born to a devout Christian family in modern day Iraq in 306, and received a solid education. He worked for the Bishop St. James of Nisbis and may have accompanied him to the Council of Nicea.

2. Ephraim then became the headmaster of a school and lived happily until the wars with the Persian Empire devastated the area. Eventually the Persian Empire acquired his homeland in a settlement with the Eastern Emperor; and so he and many other natives fled to Edessa in modern day Turkey. There he taught and wrote until his death in 373.

3. He was only ordained a deacon at about the age of 60, and considered himself to be unworthy of the priesthood despite his very austere life.

4. He wrote music extensively and apparently without much revision. His Marian hymns became especially central to Marian devotion in the East. He also wrote and sung extensively of the importance of the unity of the Church.

5. Being of Arabic background, he understood the original language of Jesus very well, and used that knowledge to interpret the Bible at great length.

F. These and many other theologians would develop rich traditions of spirituality and Scriptural interpretation. The two most prominent schools, or traditions, of Scriptural

interpretation and theology in the early Church, were the Antiochean and the Alexandrian traditions, which were named after two of the great cities of the classical world.

1. The Antiochan school, led by such figures as St. Ephraim and St. John Chrysostom, emphasized the more factual interpretation of Scripture, although certainly with moral applications to the present. They focused heavily on the doctrinal implications of Scriptural texts, such as the moral law and the relationship between grace and nature.

2. The Alexandrian school, led by such figures as Origin (circa 183-253) and St. Clement of Alexandria (circa 150-215), emphasized the spiritual meaning of Scripture. Thus, for example, they would describe the Chosen People's journey to the Promised Land as an allegory for our spiritual journey, or the parable of the Good Samaritan as an allegory for Christ's saving us from the robbers of our soul. Following the pattern of the Letter to the Hebrews, they heavily used typology, presenting Old Testament figures as types, or prefigurements, of Christ and the Gospels.

IV. As the fourth century ended and the fifth century began, the Western Roman Empire declined and even the Eastern Empire faced challenges from the Persian Empire to the east. These difficulties challenged the Christian lands, but also then led to a revival of missionary work.

A. In the Western (Latin speaking) part of the Roman Empire, tribes such as the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, Angles and Saxons began moving into the Empire and took possession of vast lands. Other tribes such as the Huns and Vandals were more destructive as they went on raiding expeditions for plunder and slaves.

1. The Western government proved inadequate to deal with the invaders, and gradually portions of the Empire, slipped out of its grasp. Thus, for example, in the early fifth century the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes from modern day Germany invaded Britain and the Romans abandoned the province.

- King Arthur was probably the last of the local Celtic rulers to rally a defense of the Roman Christian civilization. He likely defeated the invaders about the year 500 at a hill called Bragdon somewhere in southern England. His victory and his prestige became the basis for the later legends of Arthurian England.

2. In the fourth century, the Visigoths moved into modern day France and in 378 defeated the Roman Emperor Valens. They then tried negotiations with the Roman Empire and at times there was peace. But dealings with the western Roman Empire were always tense. And in 410, the Visigothic leader Alaric was disappointed that promises made by the Emperor for recognition of him as a general were not fulfilled. He then raised an army to invade Italy and threatened to sack Rome if his demands were not met. When the imperial government, now in Ravenna, refused, he conquered and sacked Rome, an event that sent shock waves through the Empire. The Empire recognized Alaric as a general, but he died soon thereafter. This incapacity to defeat the Visigoths largely ruined what was left of the prestige of the western Empire.

3. In 406, the Vandals entered Gaul and then Spain. In 429, they crossed into Africa, wrecking havoc on the cities. There was no sufficient Roman army to stop them, and they swept through North Africa in 430 and destroyed the Empire's control there.

4. In the late 437, the Huns began crossing from Asia into southeastern Europe, and the western Roman Empire could not stop them. In 451, the sister of the Roman Emperor Valentinian III asked Attila, the leader of the Huns, to marry her. Attila agreed, with the understanding that he would control Gaul. When Valentinian vetoed the arrangement, Attila led his army into Italy in 452, with little resistance. Pope St. Leo Great (440-461) went out to meet him and persuaded him to leave Roma alone,

apparently due to a vision of Saints Peter and Paul threatening to destroy the army. Attila then sacked other cities in Italy, but died shortly thereafter.

5. In 455, the Vandals, seeing the weakness of the imperial government, invaded Italy; and it was all Pope Leo could do to persuade them to avoid violence against the civilians.

6. The portion of the Goths that gradually took over Italy was called the Ostrogoths. A related tribe, called the Visigoths took over Spain. Another tribe, the Franks moved in and took over Gaul, or modern day France, while the Vandals held onto Northern Italy for the time. There was simply no army in the west to stop any of them. Some of the tribes then took to fighting each other. After Attila's death, the Huns returned to Asia

7. Among the tribes, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths and the Franks did not try to destroy Roman culture, but rather adapted it, taking to such things as the Latin language and city based culture. Thus the Roman Empire in the West did not disappear completely, but rather became a part of the new barbarian nations.

8. In 476, a barbarian king Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustus, the last Roman Emperor of the West; and that part of the Empire officially ended. He did not claim to be the Emperor, but rather sent the Eastern Emperor notice of the end of the Western Roman Empire. The eastern Emperor thought of Odoacer as a threat and worked to depose him through an Ostrogothic king Theodoric.

B. The Eastern Empire was stronger, and lasted through these disasters. That portion of the Empire would last, with varying borders, until 1453.

1. The Empire was not under as much threat as the West from the barbarian tribes. Some tribes, such as the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, and the Huns initially moved into the eastern Empire. But the eastern emperors, being stronger than the western emperors usually persuaded them to move west.

2. After the Odoacer deposed the last western Roman Emperor, the eastern Emperor Zeno, persuaded the Ostrogothic king Theodoric to conquer Italy on behalf of the eastern Empire. Theodoric was successful in the conquest, but never really accepted eastern authority, partially because he was Arian. Nevertheless the Eastern Emperors (often called the Byzantine Emperors in later eras) claimed authority over Italy until 751.

3 The eastern Roman Empire was on and off at war with the Persian Empire, based in modern day Iran. The Persians were Zoroastrians, a sort of monotheism that views secret knowledge as central to overcoming the evil god. The two Empires had been at war since the third century, with the results going back and forth. At one point, the Persian Empire got control of the Holy Land, and destroyed most of the Christian sites.

4. Gradually, the patriarchs (ecclesial leaders) of the Eastern Roman Empire formed traditions different from the Western Roman Empire. In particular, the areas around the capital (Constantinople), Alexandria in Egypt, Jerusalem, and Antioch in Syria became centers in Christianity, forming the basis of some of the Eastern traditions in the Church to this day.

5. The Eastern Emperors tried more often to intervene in Church affairs and the choosing of eparch (bishops) and patriarchs in the East than in the West. This intervention would lead to support for the Church, but also increasing clashes between the Emperor and the church leaders and even at times the Pope in Rome.

6. Justinian (527-565) became the greatest of the Byzantine Emperors of this time.

a. He supported the Church (e.g., by building in Constantinople Hagia Sophia, the largest church of the time.) But he also interfered at times in her operations, trying to control the appointment of Church leaders.

b. He also arranged for a reform and organization of the laws of the Empire. The result of this effort, called the Code of Justinian, would be dominant in the eastern Empire until it collapsed in the fifteenth century, and it would heavily influence the West as well.

c. His great general Belisarius succeeded in driving the Vandals out of northern Africa, reclaiming that land for the Empire.

d. Bellarius then launched an invasion of Italy, which succeeded for a time in capturing Sicily and all of the area up to and including Rome.

e. The Empress Antoniana tried to force Pope Silverius to accept a version of monophysitism. When he would not accept this teaching, she arranged for trumped up charges and his arrest and exile. After he died two years later, she hoped that the new Pope Vigilius would support her views, but he also taught the true faith. Justinian had him brought to Constantinople in 547, but he escaped to Calcedon.

f. Meanwhile, the Lombards moved into northern Italy and gained control there. The Byzantine Empire would control the central and southern Italy during the reign of Justinian, but could not hold on afterward.

C. Meanwhile, in the western Empire, the monasteries worked to preserve and increase civilization. And missionaries would go forth and bring the gospel to the new nations forming in the old Empire, and even beyond.