

FOUNDED UPON ROCK: PART III THE END OF THE CLASSICAL ERA

I. The great doctrinal issues that the Church debated, and the spread of Christianity generally, led to a great age of Christian scholarship in the late classical era. Of the 36 saints who are called Doctors of the Church, 13 are from the 4th and 5th centuries. (The other two great eras of Church doctors are the 13th century with four and the 16th century and early 17th centuries with seven.) Some of the great theologians were St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom and St. Ephraim,

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. St. Augustine 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, St. Augustine 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 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 for entering the Church; and he was baptized in 387.
4. At first, St. Augustine 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 if 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 quickly became central in Christian theology, as they continued to be ever since. His work The City of God set forth a Christian view of God’s working in the midst of central history.

6. His autobiographical Confessions, perhaps the world’s first spiritual autobiography and certainly the inspiration for this genre, has become a classic conversion story to this day and consistently near the top of spiritual writings.

7. One of his letters, two of his sermons, and his writing “On the Work of Monks” became the basis for monks in the future. These works and some later commentaries later became known as The Rule of Saint Augustine, which guides Augustinian monks and nuns and the Norbitine order to this day. This Augustinian spiritual tradition emphasizes simplicity of life, continual conversion, and reflection upon the mysteries of the greater kingdom.

B. Saint Jerome (c. 340-420) was a monk who worked heavily and translations and commentaries of the Bible, and is thus now known as the doctor of Scriptural interpretation.

1. Born about 340, he was raised in a Christian family, but only baptized at the age of 18. His family was fairly well off and he received an excellent classical education.

2. After St. Jerome was baptized in Rome in about the year 360, he took his faith more seriously and made many friends among monks during his travels. Starting in Rome itself, he took up many studies, including that of Hebrew in his travels and was recognized as a first rate genius.

3. For a time, St. Jerome 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, St. Jerome 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. Then, beginning in about the year 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, played 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, St. Ambrose 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 cathedral to keep the peace, 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. St. John Chrysostom 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 rebukes against decadence and corruption in the government

and the ruling class generally, 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 Mesopotamia (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 Antiochian and the Alexandrian traditions, which were named after two of the great cities of the classical world.

1. The Antiochian 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 Origen (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.

II. 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, Lombards, 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 may well have been a later name or nickname for a Roman British leader (such as perhaps Riothamus or Ambrosius Aurelianus) who rallied the remaining Roman Christians for a short time to preserve their civilization before paganism prevailed. It appears that such a leader defeated the invaders about the year 500 at a hill called Bragdon somewhere in southern England. This final defense 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 opened 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 he thought had been made by the Emperor Honorius for the granting of land in the Alps and 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 fourth century, the Huns began crossing from Asia into southeastern Europe. At first, they moved into the eastern Roman Empire. But after the eastern Emperor Eutropius began raising armies to oppose them, they moved into the western Empire, which had very little ability to stop them.

5. In 451, the sister of the Roman Emperor Valentinian III asked Attila, the leader of the Huns, to marry her. Attila agreed, and amended the proposal such that most of Gaul would be the dowry. 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.
6. 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.
7. The portion of the Goths that gradually took over Italy was called the Ostrogoths. A related tribe, called the Visigoths took over Spain. Both of these tribes were mostly Arians, believing in Jesus Christ, but as an exalted creature, not as God. 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.
8. After Attila's death, the Goths and other Germanic peoples turned against the Huns, drove them back, and forced them from Italy. The remaining Huns seemed to merge with society either in the Germanic lands and what is now called eastern Europe.
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, who did in fact defeat and depose Odoacer.
9. In the mid sixth century, another Germanic tribe called the Lombards moved into northern Italy and gained control there. The Lombards were mostly pagan, but there were some Christians among them

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 Ostigothic 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.

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. Justinian and the Persian Empire signed the “Treaty of Eternal Peace” in 532. However, the Persian Empire invaded Syria in 540, there were 17 more years of conflict before a 50 year peace was signed in 557.

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. Thus, at the end of Justinian’s reign, the the Byzantine Empire controlled southeastern Europe, Asia Minor, the Holy Land, and North Africa. There were in an uneasy peace with the Persians to the east, and were also in a dicey relationship with the mostly Germanic tribes on the outskirts of their northern and western borders.

III. Meanwhile, in the western Empire, two sources of renewal provided much of the basis for the future reconversion of Europe: the conversion of the Irish and the Franks and the perseverance of the monasteries.

A. The monasteries created a sense of stability in the Western Roman Empire and preserved a sense of mysticism in the East.

1. Monasticism was developed in the desert, both at first to escape persecution, but then also to get away the corruptions and distractions in society. People started coming to the desert monks for advice, and would come to call them abbas, or fathers, along with some desert mothers called ammas.

2. Building on St. Paul’s analogy, the monks would sometimes be called “athletes of God” because of their self discipline and training, this time for the goal of strengthening the spirit. See 1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 2:5, 4:7-8; Heb. 12:1-2.

3. St. Anthony of the desert (251-356) was considered to be the founder of western monasticism. There were monks before him, but St. Athanasius’ Life of Anthony caused monasticism to take off. St. Anthony’s own writings and writings about him very much emphasized seeing this life as a battle against evil, and salvation as akin to winning a war.

4. Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), St. John Cassian (d. 435), and St. John Climacus (St. John of the Stairs, 7th century) wrote the most famous desert works. St. Augustine (354-430), who would emphasize the centrality of God’s grace and conversion from sin, was also a monk for a time; and his rule became the foundation of the Augustinian order. St. Basil the Great (329-379) wrote the first great rule for monks in the east.

10. Desert spirituality was very much focused on reality. Away from the distractions and false joys of the world, the desert would force one to focus on

real needs and real sources of joy.

B. Under the influence of St. Patrick and his companions, the nations of Ireland came to the Christian faith in the 5th century.

1. In 430, even as St. Augustine lay dying in his city of Hippo in Northern Africa with the Vandals at the gates, a priest named Patricius (now known as St. Patrick) was planning a mission to Ireland. In 432, he and his fellow monks went to Ireland and brought about dramatic conversions there, with the island becoming almost entirely Christian by the year 500.

2. Patrick had been the son of an upper middle class family in the Roman province of Britannia, when raiders attacked his village, captured him, and sold him as a slave in Ireland. After six years, he made a dramatic escape, returned to his family now in Gaul, and was ordained a priest. His experience of Ireland put him in an ideal position to lead the conversion of that land, for he knew the Celtic language and culture very well.

3. Patrick and his fellow monks established monasteries in the small kingdoms that ruled throughout Ireland. (Tara was the most prominent kingdom, but there was no universal leader of the island or even of any large part of it.) Their self-discipline and hope of eternal life were very persuasive to the Irish people.

4. One of the new Irish monks, Columkille, as penance for starting a small war prepared a mission to convert thousands of pagans in the sixth century. Since Ireland was already mostly Christian, he went to Scotland with his monks, again with astonishing success. The monastery he established on the island of Iona would become legendary.

5. The Irish monks were also dedicated to learning and preserved many of the great Latin works by copying them into new manuscripts just as these works were largely being lost in the rest of the west.

C. Meanwhile, in Gaul, the Franks became dominant and eventually converted to Christianity under the influence of the great king Clovis.

1. During the third century, a Germanic people whom the Romans called the Franks settled into the region that is now Belgium and the Netherlands. They slowly continued to settle further south along the Rhine river. There was intermittent fighting between the Roman Empire and the Franks, but the Romans recognized a Frankish nation of the Roman Empire in 357. However, as the western Roman Empire faded, the Frankish people became independent of imperial authority. Nevertheless, they tended to adopt Roman ways, including increasingly used the Latin language and Roman currency.

2. At first, there were numerous basically independent tribes within the Frankish nation. However, in the late 5th century the Frankish kings Childeric and then Clovis united the kingdoms under their rule.

3. Until 493, the Franks were mostly pagan. However, Clovis married a Christian wife Clotilda. Largely under her influence, he began instruction in the Christian faith and was baptized about the year 500. He did not require the Franks to become Christian. But, under his influence and that of Clotilda, the Frankish people gradually became Christian over the course of the next two centuries.