

HISTORY of CHRISTIANITY

Part II – The Quest for Order: Medieval Christendom (A.D. 410 - 1483)

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Certain events in human history stand out in bold relief against all others. These are defining moments which summarize the essence of an entire age, like the storming of the Bastille in 1789 or the fall of the Berlin Wall in our own century.

Such an event took place in the year 410, when the city of Rome was sacked and burned by a Gothic chieftain named Alaric. For centuries, Rome had stood as a symbol of stability and continuity; the “eternal city” it was called. Now, Rome had been ravaged by barbarian soldiers. In faraway Palestine, in the little town of Bethlehem St. Jerome received the news of the fall of Rome with horror and shock. He wept and asked, “If Rome can perish, what then is safe?”

The answer came from St. Augustine, who replied to Jerome’s lament: “You are surprised that the world is losing its grip? That the world is grown old? Do not fear; thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle.”

For Augustine, the wellspring of youth was Christianity. It could not help but persist and grow, rising above spent empires and cultures. As soon as Augustine heard of the fall of Rome, he began to write his *magnum opus*, *The City of God*. It was the first philosophy of history written by a Christian author.

The city of God, he said, cannot be equated with any human empire or kingdom, however glorious or powerful.

Jesus had promised that the gates of hell would never prevail against the church. The church is the Body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space. It belongs to the future, as well as to the past and the present. More than anyone else, it was Augustine who provided the blueprint for the millennium of Christian history which we know as the “Middle Ages.”

THE MIDDLE AGES

But what are the Middle Ages? When did they begin and end? Why should Christians be concerned about them today?

The Middle Ages are the intervening centuries between the death of St. Augustine in 430 and the birth of Martin Luther in 1483. In popular imagination, the Middle Ages have been glamorized and romanticized. We think of knights in shining armor, the crusaders’ quest for the holy grail, King Arthur, Camelot, and all that. But, in fact, the Middle Ages were marked by violence and great suffering in what was to become Europe.

Jerome had reason to weep at the fall of Rome. For the Goths were succeeded by the Lombards, the Franks, and the Vandals, from which we get our modern word “vandalism.” Still later, the Vikings from Scandinavia would reek their own distinctive brand of havoc on the outposts of Christian civilization.

A still more sinister force arose from the deserts of Arabia as the armed forces of the prophet Muhammad (also spelled “Mohammed”), fanned out across the Mediterranean in a *blitzkrieg*-like holy war, or *jihad*, capturing Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Carthage. They advanced even into the heart of Europe, until they were stopped by Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charlemagne, at the famous battle of Poitiers, in 732.

It was not without reason that this period of history would later be called "The Dark Ages." Yet, in the thickest darkness, the light of the Gospel was never completely extinguished.

Protestant and evangelical Christians are apt to think that there were few, if any, true believers during this age of darkness and disintegration. But we should remember that we are all like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. We may be able to see further than they, but without their steadfastness, we could see nothing at all.

For example, the classics of Greece and Rome, not to mention the writings of the early church fathers, have come down to us in manuscripts painstakingly copied letter by letter in the monasteries and cathedral schools of medieval Europe. In addition to this, there is an unbroken tradition of worship and prayer, contemplation and meditation, the kind of spirituality embodied so fully in a figure like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, whom both Luther and Calvin cited frequently and with great favor.

In the midst of the oppression and bloodshed of his age (in which, it must be said, he himself played a part), Saint Bernard could describe the transcendent reality of divine love so beautifully that it still speaks across the centuries to our own hearts today:

What value has there been in all this work? This, I think: We have learned that every soul — although burdened with sins, afflicted with sorrow — may, without fear, enter a bond of society with God and may, without alarm, take up with the King of angels a sweet yoke of love.

"A sweet yoke of love," "a bond of society with God" — these were the ideals which shaped the most characteristic institutions of the Middle Ages: the great Gothic cathedrals, the universities, and the monasteries.

THE "WAVE" OF CHURCH-BUILDING

From the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries, all of Christendom, it seemed, peasants and lords, artisans and scholars, bishops and kings, contributed to a remarkable wave of church-building. As one contemporary put it, "It was as if the whole earth had cast off her old age and were clothing herself everywhere in a white garment of churches."

The stately form of the Romanesque churches had given way to the soaring spires and flying buttress of the Gothic cathedrals. The most amazing masterpiece of all was, and remains, the majestic cathedral at Chartres, whose frescoes and friezes tell the history of salvation, while the dazzling stained-glass windows turn the sanctuary and nave into an ecstasy of color and light.

For medieval men and women, life was a torturous journey up the ladder from earth to heaven. The demons were always eager to ensnare and capture lost souls in their eternal war against humanity. The way to heaven was beset by infernal dangers while pilgrims on the way were sustained by the prayers of the monks on earth and the exalted saints in heaven.

It was this theology which lay behind the rosary, relics, pilgrimages, indulgences, and many other practices of late medieval Catholicism, against which the reformers of the sixteenth century would protest in the name of God's unmerited love and grace.

What the Gothic cathedrals displayed so magnificently in stone and stained glass, the great scholastic masters of the thirteenth century set forth, with equal clarity, in their famous *summae* or systematic summaries of Christian theology.

THOMAS AQUINAS

The rediscovery of the Greek philosopher Aristotle gave a new basis for theology in the thought of Albert the Great and his brilliant student, Thomas Aquinas. While revelation and reason are distinct, Thomas argued, they are not in opposition. It is the task of Christian theology to show that faith is in harmony with reason. He gave his life to building, stone by stone, a Gothic cathedral of Christian thought.

It is significant that Thomas was never able to complete his great masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*. Near the end of his life, he experienced a vision of God, a blaze of heavenly light so overwhelming that he was not able to describe it. After this experience, he put down his pen and never wrote another word. All that I have written, he said, now seems to me like straw.

Thus, Thomas Aquinas died in 1274, his life work incomplete. Fifty years later, he was canonized by Pope John XXII. Since then, his theology has come to be regarded as normative for the Roman Catholic tradition. However, two centuries before Thomas' death, the father of scholasticism, Saint Anselm, expressed, in the form of a prayer, that yearning for God which is at the heart of all true theology and spirituality: "Oh Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek Thee, where and how to find Thee. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand."

THE MONASTIC TRADITION

Anselm was a monk, and he combined in his prayer and his theology that love of learning and desire for God, which was the wellspring of the monastic tradition. The rule of Saint Benedict had provided a blueprint for a well-ordered Christian community, whose basic motto was *ora et labora* ("pray and work").

The work of Benedictine monks involved physical labor — clearing the forests, tilling the soil — but it also involved the intellectual labor of the *scriptorium*, as ancient manuscripts were copied and biblical texts studied and commented upon in the annual cycle of the Christian year. At the heart of this great enterprise was the priority of Christian worship, the praying of the Psalms, and the rich harmony of Gregorian chant.

Again and again, throughout the medieval centuries, monastic reformers arose to call their fellow monks back to the purity and simplicity of Saint Benedict's rule.

In the thirteenth century, however, the rise of the Mendicant orders, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, introduced something radically new and different into the religious life of the Middle Ages. The word "mendicant" means "beggar," and it points to the fact that these new religious orders were free to move into the new towns and cities of Europe, begging for their food, ministering to all the needy in Jesus' name.

The Benedictine ideal had been *stabilitas* ("stability"), a tract of land, a single place where one lived, prayed, and died. The ideal of the Franciscans and Dominicans was *mobilitas* ("mobility"). Like John Wesley in a later age, their parish was the world, especially the universities where, in the medieval equivalent of a great Christian student movement, they attracted disciples from all walks of life.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Of the mendicant reformers, the one who stands out above all others, is Francis of Assisi. His given name was Giovanni. He was later called Francesca because of his mother's connection with France. His father was Pietro Bernadone, a rich cloth merchant in the Italian city of Assisi. The two ideals of his youth were the troubadour and the knight. The picture which emerges from his early biographers is that of an over-indulged, spoiled-brat type. He was "a master of revels," a playboy who spent much of his time drinking, joking, and squandering any money he could get his hands on.

At the age of 20, he got his chance to realize his dreams of glory, and went off to war. In the heat of battle, he was taken prisoner and held for one year by the enemy. Out of this experience, followed by a severe illness, Francis came to see the vanity of his former life. His conversion coincided with his identification with the helpless, the poor, and the sick. During a pilgrimage to Rome, he was confronted with hundreds of beggars who roamed the city looking for bread. In an impulsive gesture, he exchanged his fine clothes for beggars' rags and walked the streets of Rome, begging with them.

On another occasion, while riding one day near Assisi, he came across a leper in the road. He dismounted and gave the leper a gift of money, whereupon the leper seized his hand and kissed it, exposing Francis to his dreadful disease. Francis determined to live with the lepers and to serve them as Jesus would have done. Francis' future ministry was determined by two other events. One of these occurred while he was praying in an old dilapidated chapel. He heard, he said, the voice of Christ from the crucifix in the church saying, "My house is being destroyed; go, therefore, and repair it for me." Francis took this as a divine calling to rebuild the church.

The second event occurred when he appealed to his father for financial support. His father, however, was not sympathetic to his son's radical ideas and hailed him before the bishop of Assisi for discipline. In an act of defiance before the bishop, Francis declared:

Up to this day I have called Pietro Bernidone father. But now I desire to serve God and to say nothing else than, "Our Father which art in heaven." Not only money, but everything that can be called his, I will return to my father, even the clothes he has given me.

Immediately, Francis stripped himself naked and ran out of the church to take up a life of abject poverty and apostolic simplicity. He was, as a contemporary writer put it, "a naked man following a naked Christ."

Eventually, Francis gathered around him a company of like-minded disciples, who agreed to live with him a life of literal, deliberate imitation of the way of Christ and His apostles.

Francis, of course, drew opposition from the leaders of the church. Many of them, like the bishop of Assisi, were, themselves, deeply enmeshed in the futile structures of medieval society. Our modern game of chess derives from this historical period. In that game, it is no accident that the figure of the bishop serves the interest of the king and queen, while he himself lords it over many pawns.

Francis set forth a rule and a way of life which challenged this entire system. His movement may well have been driven underground and declared heretical, as that of Peter Waldo had been a generation before. However, when Francis presented his order to Pope Innocent III at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, this most powerful of all medieval popes made an extraordinary gesture. He bowed prostrate before the bare-footed beggar from Assisi and kissed his feet in a public act of devotion.

Scholars still debate whether Innocent III acted out of genuine spiritual concern or simply as a shrewd politician, trying to ward off a potential problem. In any event, in that single dramatic act, we have two contrasting figures of Jesus Christ:

- Innocent, arrayed in his purple regalia and papal tiara, *vicarius Christi* — the vicar of Christ on earth, the Christ of power and glory, resplendent in wealth and restige; and, on the other hand,
- Francis, also a vicar of Christ — not the exalted, glorified Christ, but the naked, suffering, crucified Christ. The Christ who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to offer His life on behalf of others.

It is no surprise that the Franciscan ideal was too pure, too unrealistic to survive the allurements of time and history. Soon after Francis' death in 1224, he who had renounced all property had a beautiful church building erected over the place of his birth! Still, the legacy of Francis, a saint beloved by Protestants and Catholics alike, is a reminder that Jesus' call to follow Him can break through any social barrier or ecclesiastical system.

We can still see the spirit of Francis living today in a figure like Mother Teresa. We can still join our prayer to his when we say, "Lord make me an instrument of Thy peace." And we can still lift our hearts to the Christ who calls us, no less than He did Francis, to see the world through the eyes of the Savior's love.

"REFORM IS NECESSARY!"

Francis was not the last medieval Christian to challenge the structures of the church. John Wycliffe in England, John Huss in Bohemia, Savonarola in Florence — these, and many others, all called for a reform of the church, in head and in members. As one contemporary theologian put it, "The whole world, the clergy, all Christian people, know that a reform of the church is both necessary and expedient. Heaven and the elements demand it. The very stones will soon be constrained to join in the cry."

The reform of the church would come, but with consequences that no one, from Augustine on, could have predicted.

If the Middle Ages began with the fall of Rome in 410, they can be fairly said to have concluded with the fall of another city in 1453. For a thousand years, Constantinople had withstood assault after assault. But on the eve of the Reformation, this great light in the East, the last outpost of classical Christian antiquity, succumbed to the forces of the Ottoman Turks. Hundreds of Greek scholars fled to the West, carrying with them precious manuscripts, relics of the Eastern saints, and a fresh knowledge of the language in which the New Testament was written. In 1516, Desiderius Erasmus published the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament in Basel, Switzerland. A few months later, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk in Wittenberg, Germany, was pouring over that same text, desperately seeking to discover the meaning of the Gospel of the grace of God. In all of these events, we can hear the death throes of the Middle Ages, and the birth pangs of the modern world.