



## Sixth Sunday of Easter May 5, 2013 C

### Church History (Part 4)

- ◆ Barbarians
- ◆ Two great popes
- ◆ Rise of Islam

In these articles on Church history. I am doing the best I can to give a decent summary of events and people that books have been written about. Some of the events have a complex history and are not easy to summarize in a fairly accurate way. The following are some excerpts from Article 5 of my series on Church history.

The Church is a human institution living in every age in a particular society. It is impacted by events happening in the world. For example, in the first three centuries of its existence, persecutions are the principal external force impacting the Church. In the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, the invasion of tribes called the barbarians impacts Christianity, as does the rise of Islam.

#### The barbarians

Barbarian is the name given to a diverse group of tribes, some of whom took over the Western Empire in the fifth century. The Romans call them “barbarians” because they speak no Latin or Greek, are not educated, and often plunder villages, cities and churches in their attempt to take them over. The names of the tribes we most often hear of are the Goths, Visigoths, Huns, Vandals, Lombards, Franks, Vikings, Angles and Saxons.

During the troubled third century, many barbarians are invited to settle on vacated lands within the Empire. Many of them serve in the Roman army. With the decline of the Roman army, some of the tribes start to take over parts of the empire.

In 410 Visigoth leader Alaric ransacks Rome, an event that sends shockwaves throughout the Empire. In 455 the city of Rome falls to the barbarians. In 476 barbarian leader Odoacer deposes the last Roman emperor Romulus. The year 476 marks the end of the Roman Empire whose existence can be traced to 27BC.

### Two great popes

#### *Leo the Great (440-461).*

With the sacking of Rome in 410 and the progressive crumbling of the Roman Empire in the West, a vacuum of leadership is created. Gradually, the Church will begin to fill that vacuum because it is the one stable and generally respected institution that can provide governance. The office of the pope, the bishop of Rome, will assume increasing importance.

Leo the Great—or Leo I as he is known during his years as pope—is destined to become one of the great popes in the history of the Church. He is one of two popes on whom history bestows the title “Great” because he is a man of courage, wisdom and authority. He will be mainly remembered for three achievements:

- 1) In 452 when the horrible Attila and his Huns are set to invade Rome, the unarmed Leo goes out to meet him and somehow persuades him to hold back. A few years later, he is not as successful when the Vandals come to attack Rome. While Leo cannot prevent the Vandals from looting and taking slaves, he is able to persuade them not to kill unless attacked and not to destroy the great churches of St. Peter, St. Paul and the Lateran Church.
- 2) Because of the effective way that Leo deals with the barbarians, the stature of the papacy in the Western Empire grows enormously. Also, through his writings, Leo is able to use biblical, historical and legal arguments to assert the primacy of the pope among all bishops.
- 3) Leo has a key role in the Council of Chalcedon, which fought to protect the two natures of Christ (human and divine) against heretics.

***Clovis, King of the Franks—Role in the conversion of the barbarians.*** At the time of Clovis (470-510), many of the Christian barbarians are Arian Christians and very hostile to the Catholic Church.

In 496 a political development with enormous significance for the Church is the rise to power and eventual conversion of Clovis. The Franks are a pagan and brutal tribe in what is now Northern Europe. Unlike most other barbarian tribes, the Franks have no connection with Christianity. Clovis marries Clotilda, a devout Catholic princess. Initially, he resists becoming a Christian, but like Constantine, Clovis believes that the Christian God helped him to win a very important battle. He decides to convert to Christianity believing that the Christian God is more powerful than the pagan gods.

In those days, as the king goes, so go his subjects. So when Clovis is baptized, so are three thousand of his soldiers. Some historians call this the “paganizing of Christianity.” As bishop Remi is baptizing Clovis, he tells him: “Burn what you have adored and adore what you burned.” As Clovis works his way south into what is now France, Catholic Christianity spreads throughout the tribes that have been Arian. Gradually, because of Clovis, Arian Christianity begins to die out in the Western part of the Empire.

### **Gregory the Great (540-604)**

Pope Gregory I is the other pope to receive the title “Great” and, as we shall see, he deserves it. Gregory is born into a wealthy, influential Christian Roman family in a city that is in shambles and chaos. The last half of the sixth century in the Western Empire is later called the “Dark Ages” for several reasons, one of them owing to the chaos that existed since the barbarian tribes took over Italy and many parts of Europe.

As a young man, Gregory is named prefect of Rome, serving as governor, chief of police and chief justice. It is also his duty to figure out ways to distribute food to the poor in Rome and in southern Italy.

In his mid-thirties, after his father’s death, Gregory suddenly resigns his position and gives away much of his family’s estate to help the poor. He turns the family mansion into a monastery and founds several other monasteries on family property in other parts of Italy. Gregory adopts the lifestyle of a monk.

In 579 Gregory’s quiet contemplative lifestyle is disrupted when the pope calls him to Rome as a deacon. Then the pope sends him to Byzantium (new name for Constantinople) as his personal ambassador to seek military help from the emperor and help for the poor of Rome. After seven years in the corrupt imperial court, Gregory gladly returns to Rome. When a plague breaks

out in Rome in 589, the pope dies and the people of Rome elects Gregory as the new pope, a job he does not want. In fact, he hides for three days hoping the people would find someone else. So Gregory, like Ambrose, gives a very reluctant ‘yes’ to the top church position. He is the first monk to be elected pope. As pope, Gregory the Great is a social worker, pastor, theologian, educator, administrator, farmer, and builder. He is a rare person who functions well in all of those roles.

**Helper of the poor.** For the poor, the Church is the only welfare agency in existence. Using the profits from farms owned by the Church, Gregory feeds many poor people. Profits from farms also help him rebuild crumbling churches and build new ones. He takes responsibility for repairing the walls of the city as well, a task that is needed for the defense of Rome.

**Church educator.** Carl Koch writes:

*As the leader of the church at large, Gregory showed concern for the poorly educated clergy. Priests of the time were chosen by local rulers or townsmen, often for political, rather than spiritual, reasons. Gregory encouraged bishops to open schools for men wanting to become priests. In turn, he expected that the priests would open church schools for children.*

**Liturgical music.** The first Christians learn Jewish hymns by heart; later they will learn Roman and Greek hymns. But without sheet music, melodies are not easily passed on to future generations. In Gregory’s time, psalms and hymns sung in monasteries later evolve into *Gregorian Chants*, a beautiful form of sacred music that will nourish the faith of the Church in the West for centuries.

**Missionaries to Britain.** Gregory not only seeks to bring the Gospel to the Lombards and other tribes in Italy, he also sends forty monks from his own Benedictine monastery in Rome to Britain. The monks are led by their abbot, Augustine of Canterbury, who has great success in England. Unlike many of the other barbarian tribes, whose members are baptized under the orders of their kings and chieftains, the “fierce” Anglo-Saxons come voluntarily into the Church. However, it takes about a hundred years before the whole of Britain is Christianized.

Commenting on Pope Gregory’s impact on the Church, Carl Koch writes:

*Gregory the Great’s contributions to the church were enormous and far-reaching in their effects. His leadership solidified the church in a time of tremendous*

*calamity. Even so he humbly saw himself as “Servant of the Servants of God,” a title that all popes since him have adopted.*

Gregory the Great personifies the image of a saintly Church leader. He truly exemplified his own description of a Church leader which he himself spoke about in these words:

*The true shepherd of souls is pure in his thoughts, fearless in his deeds, wise in silence, fluent in speaking. He approaches everyone with charity and compassion, surpasses all by his relationship with God, joining humbly with those who do good works, but rises up in zealous justice against the vices of sinners. In his external functions he does not neglect matters of the soul, neither does he neglect to take care of external matters.* (The Popes—Histories and Secrets, p.106)

### **Rise of Islam and its consequences for Christianity**

While Pope Gregory is exercising leadership in the West, a new and powerful force is gathering strength in the East, around the Red Sea, i.e., a new religion called Islam whose followers become known as Muslims, both terms referring to “submission to God.”

In 610 an Arabian merchant, Mohammed (570-632), has a conversion experience. Mohammed claims that the angel Gabriel visited him and gave him a series of revelations which his followers recorded in the Koran (Qur’an). Mohammed lives in Mecca for ten years after his conversion, teaching and developing his faith, but in 622, he and his followers meet persecution. Their flight, called the **Hegira**, is the event that marks the first year of the Muslim era. Mohammed raises an army there and returns to Mecca as a triumphant warrior. The new religion spreads like wildfire across the Arabian Desert.

After Mohammed’s death in 632, his early successors spread the Islamic faith through previous Christian areas like Damascus (635) Antioch (637) Syria and Jerusalem (638) Palestine and Alexandria (642), Carthage (695), Northern Africa and Persia (650), Cyprus, southern Italy, and even parts of Spain (711). A war-weary, collapsing empire is virtually defenseless against the onslaughts of Islam. The Muslims are on their way to overrunning France until they encounter Charles Martel, a warrior king. As we shall see in the next article, Charles’ son (Pepin), and especially his grandson Charlemagne, will play a huge role in both the secular and religious history of the Western Empire in the eighth and ninth centuries. Although Muslims in general do not force their vanquished peoples to convert,

they impose taxes on the “infidels” (non-believers). This is incentive enough for many Christians to embrace Islam, especially in the East.

The Islamic invasion has enormous consequences for Christianity. The three ancient patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria fall. As a result, their influence in the Church ceases. The Eastern Empire is continually occupied with fending off the advancing Muslims. Michael Pennock writes:

*Muslims became the adversaries of Christians for the next seven centuries. It took several centuries for Christians to pull out of the Dark Ages. Eventually, Christianity launched a series of holy wars, the Crusades, to win back the Holy Land. Though the Muslim invasions were a major setback for Christianity, Muslim scholarship helped preserve ancient Greek learning. Scholars like Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980-1037) and Averroës (Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) helped introduce the philosophy of Aristotle to the West. During the High Middle Ages, theologians like St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas would use Aristotelean philosophy to advance Catholic philosophical and theological thought.* (This is our Church, p.89)

### **Reflection questions**

- 1. What struck you most in this article?**
- 2. In what ways do people in our time or in the recent past act like barbarians?**
- 3. What are some of the qualities that you especially look for in a pope?**

### **Two books on church history**

At the end of Article 1 is a bibliography of the books I reference as I write these articles. The two books I most often quote from are:

- 1) *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* by Carl Koch
- 2) *This is Our Church* by Michael Pennock

Have a blessed week,

