

FOURTH to SEVENTH CENTURIES

Part Three: Fall of Rome and Rise of the Western Church

In this Article, we will look at:

- **The Barbarians and their impact on the Empire and Christianity**
- **Pope Leo the Great**
- **Clovis' role in the conversion of the Barbarians**
- **Justinian, the last strong emperor**
- **Pope Gregory the Great**
- **The rise of Islam and its consequences for Christianity**

Besides being a divine institution, the Church is also a human institution alive 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.

In our own time, the Church is challenged by the pervasiveness of a secular culture often hostile to Christian values, and by modern technology. In the United States, the face of Catholicism is changing with the growing number of Hispanic people.

The Barbarians

When Constantine moves his capital from Rome to Constantinople, the Eastern Roman Empire continues to grow in power and influence. During the same period, the Western Empire experiences continued decline, mainly due to ineffective and corrupt leaders.

Barbarian is the name given to a diverse group of tribes, some of whom have taken 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.

Barbarians

A diverse group of tribes who were uneducated and who plundered villages and towns.

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, the unthinkable happens. 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 back to 27BC.

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 would 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.

- In 452, when the horrible Attila and his Huns are set to invade Rome, Leo, unarmed, 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.

- During Leo’s time, the stature of the papacy grows enormously. The fact that the emperor has to depend on the pope to defend Rome against the barbarians gives rise to Leo’s position as one of the key figures

in almost all government matters within the Western Empire. Through his writings, Leo is able to use biblical, historical and legal arguments to assert the primacy of the pope among all bishops.

- For his role in the Council of Chalcedon, as noted in the last Article, Leo's famous letter called the *Tome* is fundamental in the Council debates on the question of protecting the Church from monophysitism (doctrine that rejects the dual nature of Christ). After Leo's *Tome* is read, the bishops cry out: "This is the faith of the Church. Peter has spoken through Leo." The bishops recognize the special role of the Bishop of Rome in the governance of the Church.

Clovis' (470-510) role in the conversion of the barbarians

At the time of Clovis, 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, King of the Franks. 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 says to 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. Carl Koch writes:

The conversion of Clovis and the Franks had monumental significance for the rise of what is called Christendom, that is, Christianity as the dominant organizational and cultural force in society. This was because in the centuries after Clovis, the Frankish kings so enmeshed the church in governmental affairs

that church and state were hardly distinguishable from each other. This arrangement enabled the church to grow in number, but it often compromised the church as well. (A Popular History of the Church, p.98)

Around the time of Clovis' conversion, a new *calendar* is devised at the direction of the pope, which will eventually replace the calendar that has been used in the Roman Empire for hundreds of years. Instead of counting the years from the founding of Rome, the new calendar reckons years beginning from the presumed date of the birth of Christ. Christians accept this calendar as a reminder that for them, Jesus Christ is the center of all time and history.

During this period, monasteries play a significant role in bringing harmony to Christian life. The monks are also responsible for the conversion of many barbarians.

Justinian, the last strong emperor (527-565)

While the *Western Empire* crumbles during the fifth century, the Eastern Empire (now called the Byzantine Empire, its original name) continues to exist and remains relatively strong especially under the leadership of the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. His main legacy or most significant achievement is the reform of civil law. Most of the existing laws in the Empire were written in pre-Christian times and do not reflect Christian values.

The new *Justinian Code*, which has taken seven years to write, removes much of the arbitrary power that a man had over his wife and children. A father can no longer send his children into slavery to pay debts. Women can now hold property in their own name. Women are protected from being easily divorced by their husbands. Admittedly, some of the punishments specified by the code for certain crimes are dreadful—not what we would consider Christian—such as the cutting off of hands and ears. Like all law, the Justinian Code is based in part on the customs of the time. Despite its problems, however, it reflects Christian ethics better than the old laws.

Persecution of Jews. Carl Koch writes:

Although based in Christianity, Justinian's rule was not without ruthless elements. The emperor, like many rulers in the pre-Christian era, believed he was responsible for the religion of his subjects. He

believed in Christianity, so everyone else should too; thus all would go to heaven. Because of this conviction, Justinian persecuted Jews, other non-Christians, and heretics.

Prejudice toward Jews and persecution of them was common throughout Christianity at the time Justinian and the Frankish kings demanded that Jews convert. But the rulers also depended on the Jews to provide to Christians those services that Christians were forbidden to provide, such as usury, which is the lending of money with a charge for interest. Jews were forced into money lending as an occupation because it was illegal for them to own land or participate in many other professions. Besides, Christians needed and wanted loans. But at the same time, Jews were scorned for participating in financial professions and were subjected to torture and sometimes death by the society that benefited from their financial services. (ibid, p.99)

An emperor in control of the Church. Carl Koch continues:

Justinian thought that in addition to persecuting non-Christians, it was his duty to tell the church what to do and what to believe. Once he even kept the pope under arrest in Constantinople. Justinian made regulations for electing bishops and ordered them to supervise public works projects, enforce laws related to morals, and take care of orphans. In some districts, the bishops, given so many secular responsibilities, had more authority than the governors. (ibid p.99)

Gregory the Great (540-604)

Pope Gregory I is one of two popes to receive the title “Great” and, as we shall see, he deserves it. He is sometimes called the last of the “Latin Fathers of the Church” and the “first medieval pope.” 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 will later be called the “Dark Ages” for several reasons, one of them owing to the chaos that has existed since the barbarian tribes have taken 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, 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 townsfolk, 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. (The church schools, along with the monastery schools, were the only sources of education for the laity.) Gregory also advocated priestly celibacy, though he did not require it. Gregory wrote many letters covering many topics such as the Bible, the duties of pastors, and the proper way to celebrate the liturgy. Nine hundred of his letters are still preserved in libraries. (ibid, 106-107)

Pope Gregory the Great

**Pastor, social worker,
educator, administrator,
theologian and writer**

Liturgical music. The first Christians learn Jewish hymns by heart; they will later 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 will later evolve into *Gregorian Chants*, a beautiful form of sacred music that will serve to nourish the faith of the Church in the West for centuries.

Convertor of the barbarians. Carl Koch writes:

Like Pope Leo the Great, who restrained Attila the Hun through persuasion, Gregory had to be a diplomat. In effect, the pope had to take the place of the government. Accordingly, Gregory negotiated with and sent missionaries to the Lombards and other barbarian tribes. The church had chosen to try to make alliances with the barbarian tribes and convert them, rather than resist them. That decision made all the difference for the development of Christendom in the West, for gradually all the barbarian tribes would be converted and the whole of what is now Europe would be solidly Christian. (ibid p.107)

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 will take 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.

Most of Gregory's efforts were expended on the Western part of the church because the West was more strife-torn than the East. The West was afflicted by nomadic invasions, widespread disease, and a babble of languages that prevented communication. Latin had become virtually unknown by the common

people, and dialects were developing that would later become Italian, Spanish, French, and German. (ibid, p.108)

Gregory the Great personifies the image of a saintly Church leader. He truly exemplifies his own description of a Church leader which he himself speaks 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)

Commenting on Gregory's papacy, Kevin Hughes writes:

Gregory's pontificate marks the clearest point at which, almost by default, the See of Peter begins to carry both temporal and spiritual authority in the western world. The pontificate of Gregory was the first stage in the centralization of authority and influence in the papal office that was to be one of the hallmarks of the medieval world.

But Gregory's influence did not extend simply to the bureaucratic development of the medieval papacy. To later medieval men, he was "our beloved Gregory," the last of the Latin Fathers. Gregory had the heart of a contemplative, but he knew all too well that the needs of others often required that the contemplative life be integrated with the active life of service. He is one of the first great defenders of this "mixed life" of action and contemplation. (Church History—Faith Handed On, p.44)

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 vanquish 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 (IbnSina, 980-1037) and Averroës (IbnRushd, 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 spoke to you most in this article?
2. What surprised you, confused you, or shocked you most about this period in church history?
3. In what ways do people in our time or in the recent past act like barbarians?
4. What are some of the qualities that you especially look for in a pope?
5. What are your thoughts and feelings about the Muslim religion today?
6. Do you have any questions about this period in Church history?