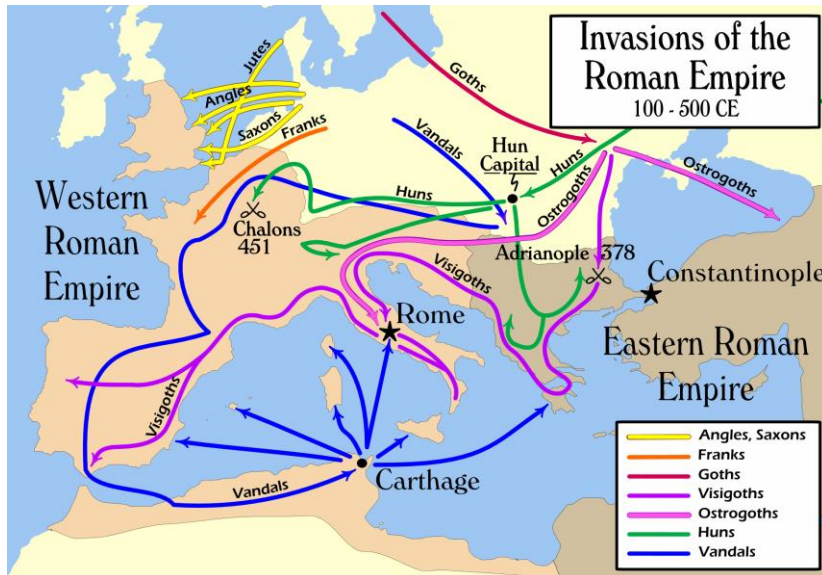


Medieval Christianity in the West Church History, Lesson 11

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gozalez.)

The decline and defeat of the Roman Empire starting in the 400's AD led to the rise of the power of the church. In many ways the church filled the vacuum left by the empire. The barbarian invasions led to the development and empowerment of Benedictine (western) Monasticism and the Papacy.

Barbarian Invasions



- Vandals took Carthage in 439.
 - The Vandals were Arian and persecuted the orthodox believers.
- The Visigoths took Rome in 410.
 - By 415 they were ruling Spain.
 - However, their reign was disorganized and disastrous and they began to recognize the value of the Christianized culture they had conquered.
 - Eventually, the Visigoth King, Recared (586-601) converted to Nicene orthodoxy.

- The conversion of Recared and his nobles led to the church playing a role in the legislation of his kingdom. This led to stability but not always to freedom.
 - The council of Toledo declared that priests could only marry with their bishop's permission. This confirmed the pattern of celibacy for ministers in the medieval church.
 - This period also discriminated against Jewish people. Those who had been forcibly converted were not allowed to return to the faith of their ancestors. And those who observed Jewish rituals could have their children taken from them.
- Gaul was invaded by Burgundians and Franks. The Burgundians were Arians and the Franks were pagan. In 534 the Burgundians were conquered by the Franks.
- The British Isles were conquered by the Angles and Saxons after the Roman legions withdrew to assist the troops in Europe against invaders. The Angles and Saxons were pagans but were eventually converted by missionaries from Ireland and from Rome itself.
- Ireland had been evangelized by St. Patrick and other missionaries. And because Ireland was never a part of the Roman Empire and didn't experience the waves of invasions that mainland Europe did, they experience a measure of peace. The Irish monasteries began sending missionaries out, most notably to Scotland and then south to the areas conquered by Angles and Saxons.

- In 590 Pope Gregory sent missionaries to the kingdom of Kent in the British Isles and their leader, Augustine (not Augustine of Hippo) eventually evangelized King Ethelbert and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury.
- Italy itself was originally invaded by the Ostrogoths, then later by the Vandals. The city of Rome was in total chaos and eventually the only hope of any peace and survival lay with the church. The church sought support from Christianity in the East (Constantinople) and also from the Franks who had converted from paganism to Christianity.
 - This is essentially how the church came to play such a “political” role in government in Europe. The old Roman Empire was in shambles, the Germanic tribes weren’t able to rule without some administrative assistance, and only the church could provide that assistance.
 - Eventually, the church’s political clout and alliance with the powerful Franks in the west grew to such an extent that eventually the pope crowned Charlemagne the Holy Roman Emperor on December 26, 800 AD.

As we’ve noted before, the church filled the power vacuum left by the Roman Empire, and it did so primarily through Benedictine Monasticism and the Papacy.

Benedictine Monasticism

- First of all, we need to remember where “monasticism” came from in the first place. When Constantine converted and the church joined the halls of power in the Roman Empire, some considered the church to be too compromised and retreated to the deserts, mostly in Egypt and northern Africa, for solitude and purification.
- However, monasticism in Europe developed along different lines.
 - From the beginning western monasticism was not in constant tension with the church hierarchy.
 - Western monasteries did not encourage total silence and solitude.
 - And western monasticism encouraged spiritual discipline and training for the purpose of a mission in the world, not just for personal sanctification.
 - We might say that western monasticism was a more “worldly” monasticism.
- The most important figure in the formative years of western monasticism was Benedict, who was born in 480 AD in Italy. He not only started a monastery, but influenced all western monasticism through his “Rule”, now called Benedict’s Rule.
- His rules differed from eastern monasticism in several ways:
 - Monks were allowed fresh fruits and vegetables.
 - Monks were allowed to have a blanket and a pillow.
 - Their life was one of discipline and poverty, but not extreme deprivation.
 - And the emphasis was on an orderly community not extreme solitude.
 - All of the jobs were to be divided equally, which meant that older members and “higher ranking” members still had to “do the dirty work” when it was their rotation. In fact, to show that “kitchen duty” was important to the Lord, they “changed the kitchen patrol” during one of the services of the chapel.
 - Another important part of the life of the monks was their 8 daily “chapels” or prayers, 7 during the day and one in the middle of the night. This was based on Psalm 118.164 and Psalm 119.62.

- Two primary values of Benedictine Monasticism was permanence and obedience. A monk could not leave his monastery and join another unless he was sent there by the abbot. And monks had to obey the abbot unquestioningly.
- Finally, we benefit from Benedictine Monasticism because they became adept at copying the Bible and other books. Because they needed copies of the Scriptures for their Scripture readings during the 8 daily services, they produced lots of manuscripts of the Bible. These copies help preserve God's Word for us today!

The Development of the Papacy

- In the earliest centuries of the church, the numerical strength was in the eastern Greek-speaking churches. And churches like Antioch and Alexandria were more important than the church in Rome. And, even in Latin speaking regions, churches in Northern Africa seemed to provide the theological leadership.
- However, of course, the church in Rome was connected to the historical power center of the Empire.
- The barbarian invasions brought about the rise of the power of the bishop of Rome who eventually came to be known as the "pope", meaning "father".
- The first "pope" in the modern sense was Pope Leo, or "Leo the Great".
 - When Attila the Hun invaded Italy in 452 the road from the north to Rome itself was completely open to him. However, Leo marched out to speak to Attila and somehow convinced him to not attack Rome. Instead he turned north and died a short time later.
 - In 455 when the Vandals invaded from North Africa, Leo persuaded them to not burn the city.
 - Leo also articulated the traditional arguments for the bishop of Rome being the head of the church because Jesus had given Peter the keys to the kingdom.
- Gregory the Great was perhaps the most significant pope during this period. He was bishop of Rome from 590 – 604. He didn't necessarily want the position of pope, but once he was given the job he did it with great zeal.
 - He organized distribution of food to the poor, organized the defense of the city, and the rebuilding of the aqueducts.
 - Theologically, he challenged the supremacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople.
 - He articulated both the doctrine of penance and purgatory. (Although he claimed to respect the theology of Augustine, he modified it in significant ways.)
 - He also taught that the "mass" constituted a re-sacrificing of Christ.
- The papacy had its "ups and downs". Many of them because of conflicts with the eastern church in Constantinople.
 - Up until Gregory III (731 – 741) the election of a pope in Rome had to be confirmed by the authorities in Constantinople.
 - But shortly after this the influence of Constantinople waned in Italy and the papacy had to look for support elsewhere. That is when they turned increasingly to the Franks. This is eventually what led to the crowning of Charlemagne.

Moslem Invasions

- After the crowning of Charlemagne, the “Holy Roman Empire” hoped for peace. It was not to be.
- Mohammed and his followers fled to Medina in 622.
- They eventually retook Mecca.
- By the time of Mohammed’s death in 632 much of Arabia was under Moslem control.
- Their armies were brutal and swift.
 - By 634 most of Arabia was consolidated under their control.
 - Also by 634 they had experienced victories over some Byzantine armies.
 - Shortly after that they invaded Syria.
 - They conquered Damascus in 635.
 - They conquered Jerusalem in 638.
 - In 640 they invaded Egypt and founded Cairo.
 - In 642 they took Alexandria.
 - By 695 Carthage fell. And almost all Christian witness and worship ceased in Northern Africa for 1000 years.
 - By 711 Moslem armies crossed the Straights of Gibraltar and conquered most of Spain.
 - Finally they were defeated by Charles Martel at the battle of Tours in 732.

Some final thoughts:

- Despite the fact that we see the seeds of disintegration in the church at this time, we should not assume that all church members were false believers.
- We should be grateful for the work of the monks at this time in preserving the text of the Old and New Testaments.
- We should also remember that our own time is not the first time when there is a great conflict between Islam and Western Civilization.