

Church History, Lesson 13

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

The Crowning of Charlemagne –

- When Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day of 800 AD it put the church in an ambiguous position.
 - The church had the power to crown the king.
 - BUT... it once again tied the church VERY closely to the government with all of its blessings and curses!
- The Holy Roman Empire included almost all of Western Europe. The only exceptions were the British Isles and small parts of Spain.
- Charlemagne believed that HE ruled the empire BOTH governmentally and ecclesiastically!
 - He appointed bishops, which wasn't really the place of the emperor, but he did seek worthy men to fulfill the offices of the church.
 - He enacted laws that required the preaching to be in the language of the people.
 - He established Sunday as a day of worship and rest not commerce.
 - He collected the tithe as if it was a tax.
- The institution of monasticism had fallen into decay, with many of the abbots just seeking wealth and comfort. Charlemagne charged Benedict of Aniane (not Benedict of Nursia who wrote "Benedict's Rule") with cleaning up the monasteries. He was able to enforce "Benedict's Rule" throughout the empire.
- Charlemagne also pursued educational reforms.
 - He invited Alcuin of York to join his court. Alcuin was able to reintroduce to the Franks learning that had been preserved in the monasteries of Britain.
 - He also brought Theodulf to be the bishop of Orleans.
 - Theodulf ordered that throughout his diocese every church have a school.
 - And these schools were to be open to the poor as well as the rich.

Continuing Decay –

- The glory of Charlemagne's empire and his reforms didn't last much longer than his own life!
- His son and grandsons didn't have the strength to rule the vast empire.
- **Feudalism** was introduced into the empire because of the Arab conquests.
 - Because the Arab conquests cut off any trade with the coastal towns of the Mediterranean and with the Orient, commerce ground to a halt.
 - Because of this, the primary base of wealth was land.
 - Consequently, kings and other lords would "pay" for services (often military protection or conquest) with land.
 - This contributed to the fragmentation of the empire and the decline of all centralized power, including the power of kings.
- **Theological Decay –**
 - During this time, when there would be times of peace, learning would thrive, schools and monasteries were operated smoothly, and manuscripts of the Scriptures and other books would be copied.
 - However, there was little "theological progress". In other words, there was almost no one who could be considered a "systematic theologian" during this time.
 - Instead, all theological debate and learning would focus on only one specific point of worship or of theological learning.

- The one exception during this period was John Scotus Erigena. He was a systematic theologian from Ireland. However, his theology was tainted heavily with Neoplatonism. Luckily, his writings were so academic and abstract that very few people understood them! 😊
- **Theological debates at this time included:**
 - There was an argument about whether or not Jesus Christ, according to his humanity, was the son of God “by adoption” or by nature.
 - Predestination was debated around this time.
 - This debate centered around a monk named Gottschalk of Orbais. He had studied Augustine’s writings and believed that the church had abandoned the teachings of this church father especially concerning predestination.
 - He was eventually condemned as a heretic.
 - (We can assume that this was debated because there was an increasing emphasis on works instead of grace in salvation.)
 - Paschasius Radbertus wrote *On the Body and the Blood of the Lord*, and declared that the elements of communion became the body and blood of the Lord when it was consecrated by the priest. He stated that human senses cannot normally perceive the change, but in extraordinary cases a believer would be allowed to body and blood of Christ instead of the bread and wine.
 - This position was debated and Charles the Bald (grandson of Charlemagne) asked Ratramnus of Corbie to clarify this issue. He stated that the body and blood of Christ are truly present in the elements but that the “Eucharistic” body of Christ was different from the “historical” body of Christ, which is sitting at the right hand of God the Father.
 - The fact that this was debated at all shows that not everyone believe in the “doctrine of transubstantiation” at this period. Some thought that it was simply the result of popular exaggeration and inexact theological language.
 - In 1215 he 4th Lateran Council proclaimed the official doctrine of transubstantiation.

10th Century Invasions – The Scandinavian Norsemen invaded by ships and Hungarians repeatedly invaded German territory during this time. These invasions added to the disruption of this time. One historian called this a century of lead and iron.

Decline and Decay in the Papacy –

- Even though the pope had crowned Charlemagne and seemingly held the power to appoint kings, Rome and the Vatican itself was often in chaos at this time.
- Pope Nicholas I (858 – 867) was greatly strengthened by something called “The False Decretals”.
 - The documents were a forgery, probably by a low level ecclesiastic in Germany who wanted the pope to have greater power over his immediate superiors. However, Nicholas and the rest of Europe considered them valid and he took this new power to heart, pursuing his responsibilities with great zeal.
 - Part of his efforts included challenging the constant warring of the powerful who often seemed to start wars just for the sport of it, and then the common people suffered greatly.
- The next pope, Hadrian II, continued some of these helpful reforms.
- However, the next pope, John VIII, began the first signs of decline. He appealed for help from the Emperor, Charles the Fat, and from the Byzantine Empire in the East against the Muslim invasions. Not only did he receive no help, he was murdered in his own palace. It is said that his aide tried to poison him, but because the poison didn’t work quickly enough, he just bashed in his head!
- From then on, the popes were appointed and then died in rapid successions. Some were starved in the dungeons of their own palaces, others were strangled. One was disinterred, displayed in the streets, his body mutilated, and his remains thrown in the river.
- At times there were two or three popes claiming the position.
- At least one pope kept a lover and sired a son. Eventually, that son actually held the position of pope because of the power of his mother.
- **Eventually, all of this corruption lead to a desire for some kind of reform and renewal!**