

FOURTH TO SEVENTH CENTURIES

Part One: Constantine, Church Councils, Heresies and Monasticism

In articles one and two, we looked at the beginnings of Catholic Christianity and how it not only survived but grew despite attacks from within (heresies) and attacks from without (persecutions). We were introduced to some of the greater teachers or apologists whom God raised up to defend the Christian faith. Until 311, Christianity was a persecuted religion.

In this and the next two articles, we will look at developments in the Church between the fourth and seventh centuries. In this article we will look at:

- Constantine and his impact on Christianity
- Heresies and Church councils
- Rise of Monasticism

Constantine and his impact on Christianity

In spite of brutal persecution by the Roman emperors Decius and Diocletian, the number of Christians grows to about five million by the year 300 out of a total population of about fifty million in the Roman Empire. In 311 Emperor Galerius ends the long persecution that began in 302 with Diocletian. But it is the event that happens the following year that will change the destiny of the Catholic Church for centuries to come.

In 312, Constantine, Roman Emperor of the West (Western Mediterranean region), finds himself and his troops engaged in a crucial battle at the Milvian Bridge outside of Rome. In his *Life of Constantine*, Church historian Eusebius reports that the emperor had a dream before the battle in which it was revealed to him that he would be victorious in battle if he placed the Greek monogram of Christ, the *Chi-Rho* (first two letters of Christ's name in Greek) on the shields and banners of his troops. Constantine does so and wins a decisive battle, attributing his victory to the Christian God. The next year 313, Constantine issues the *Edict of Milan*, sometimes called the *Edict of Toleration*, with the agreement of Licinius, Emperor of the East. The Edict grants religious freedom throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity is no longer an illegal and persecuted religion. Soon after issuing the Edict of Milan, Constantine (whose mother Helena is a Christian)

starts to actively promote Christianity because he sees it as a force that could unify his empire.

He builds beautiful churches, enacts laws honoring Sunday, Christmas and other holy days, exempts clergy from taxation, and much more.

In 324, Constantine defeats the anti-Christian emperor of the East Licinius and becomes the sole emperor—ruling East and West. As Constantine looks at both sides of his empire, he sees that the East is the more attractive place from the viewpoint of population, material wealth and social and cultural sophistication. In 230 Constantine transfers the capital of his empire from Rome to the old city of Byzantium, and renames it Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). This city becomes the center of Eastern Christianity. All of the important Church councils during this period take place in the East and not in Rome, the capital of the West. Making Constantinople the new capital of the Empire has important implications for the Church. Prior to 239, Rome is the capital city of Christianity and we can say of *Roman Catholicism*. After 239 Constantinople becomes a second Rome, and the Patriarch (head bishop) of Constantinople starts to see himself as *equal* in jurisdiction to the bishop of Rome.

So from 230 we have an *Eastern Church* centered in Constantinople and a *Western Church* centered in Rome. The Eastern Church is largely Greek in language and thought, the Western Church is Latin in orientation. Each develops its own style of liturgy. Going forward, the Eastern and Western churches tend to look down their noses on each other. Gradually, tensions develop which lead to a final parting of ways in 1054.

Legalized Christianity—a mixed blessing. The *Edict of Milan* legalized Christianity and brought obvious blessings to the Church. It brought an end to endless and brutal persecutions of Christians, lost property was restored, new and beautiful churches and basilicas were built. While pagans in general were tolerated, Christian heretics were not. Their writings were burned and their churches were given to the Catholic faith. But the Edict also led to some

new challenges for the Church. The following are some negative consequences of legalized Christianity.

- Forceful emperors start to see themselves not only as defenders of the state but also of the Church. Such extreme interference in Church affairs is called *Caesaropapism*, the combining of the power of secular government with the authority of the Church. The Eastern Church is especially subject to the whims of political rulers who sometimes elect and depose bishops, and force churches to accept the emperor's theological viewpoint. The Western Church, because of the authority of the bishop of Rome and its distance from Constantinople, remains relatively independent.
- The emperor's endorsement of Christianity leads to mass conversions to the Church. Often, these conversions are only skin deep. Many become Christian in order to keep their citizenship.
- Many churchmen become powerful secular rulers. They acquire wealth, wage war, and often put the affairs of the state before spiritual matters. Christianity goes from being an "underground" Church and countercultural to being the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Even though Constantine favors Christianity, he is not baptized until before his death. One reason may have been that he is not ready to embrace the Christian way of life. He is ruthless in many ways. He does not hesitate to execute anyone who he thinks might be a rival to the throne. This includes several members of his own family.

Formation of the Creed — Church councils and heresies

Each Sunday in Church, we profess our belief in the central truths of our faith by means of the Nicene Creed, more accurately called the Nicene-Constantinople Creed (derived from two Church councils, Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381)). The text of the creed does not come about as the result of peaceful dialogue but, in the course of time, through violent arguments, conflicts among people, cultures and regions, exiles, and eventually, through the working of the Holy Spirit who we might say miraculously delivers the Church from Arianism.

Through the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit, the first Christians led by the Apostles come to believe in the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity—one God, three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They also come to accept that Jesus is both divine and human.

Gradually, in the post Apostolic era, people start to ask questions or seek to comprehend the mysteries of the Christian faith expressed in Baptism and eucharistic formulas. How could God be one in three persons at the same time? How could a man—who was born, lived and died—be God? How could Jesus be fully human and fully God? How could the mysteries of our faith be explained in different cultural and intellectual circles? These questions and others reach a boiling point in the fourth and fifth centuries. Church councils are convened to deal with false answers that are beginning to be embraced by both the clergy and laity.

Arianism and the Council of Nicaea (325). Arianism takes its name from Arius (250-336), a priest and popular preacher in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius, in his attempt to protect the uniqueness and transcendence of God the Father, denies the divinity of Jesus. According to Arius, "the Word did not co-exist with the Father from all eternity." He believes that Jesus is above humans but somehow less than God. His teaching has grave consequences not only for the doctrine of the trinity but also for Christian belief about salvation. If Arius was right in his belief that the Word of God is not God, then humanity was not redeemed by Jesus. When Arius, despite being condemned by his local bishop, continues to preach his false doctrine and gains the support of other bishops, Constantine, fearing the heresy to be a threat to the unity of the empire, calls the *Council of Nicaea* (a town near Constantinople).

This Council of Nicaea is the first ecumenical (worldwide) council in the Church's history (Vatican II was the twenty-first). It brings together about 300 bishops, nearly all from the Eastern Church. Sylvester, bishop of Rome, sends two representatives. Some of the bishops bear the physical wounds of Diocletian's persecution but now they are wined and dined by the emperor in one of his palaces. They may have wondered if the kingdom of God could be more splendid.

All of the bishops at Nicaea, except two, join together in condemning the teaching of Arius. In seeking to express that Jesus is totally equal to the Father, they use the Greek word *homoousios*, which means “same substance” as the Father.

The dispute should have ended there, but it does not. Two or three bishops later decide that the Church cannot settle this question by using the unbiblical word *homoousios* and they conclude that Arius is actually right. They manage to change the minds of a few other bishops and then approach the emperor to convince him. (These bishops have forgotten that Tertullian had used the unbiblical word *trinity* to talk about another mystery of the Christian faith.)

This new dispute about the divinity of Christ begins an unfortunate chapter of the involvement of the Church with the state. When the pro-Arian bishops sway the emperor and succeeding emperors to their opinion, the emperors begin to put political pressure on the bishops supporting the Council of Nicaea’s Creed. In fact, a number of pro-Nicene bishops are expelled from their local dioceses by force.

During this fifty year period, St. Athanasius is the staunch defender of the Church’s belief on the divinity of Christ. He is exiled no less than five times from his diocese in Alexandria in Egypt. At times, the crisis is so bleak that St. Jerome in 361 famously writes: “*The entire world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian.*”

Soon after, the tide begins to turn back in favor of the truth expressed at Nicaea. Two big factors were:

- The writings and efforts of three bishop-theologians, who come to be known as the “Cappadocian Fathers” (St. Basil of Caesarea and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzen), influence and convince many bishops who are on the fence about this issue. They pick up the mantle of Athanasius who dies in 381.
- The sudden death of the Arian emperor in battle is seen by many as providential. Two new emperors, Gratian in the West and Theodosius in the East, intervene on the side of the Nicenes.

In 380 Theodosius establishes Christianity the official religion of the empire and appoints Gregory

of Nazianzen as Bishop of Constantinople. The three previous bishops were Arian. In 381, Theodosius convenes the **Council of Constantinople** in which he reaffirms the Son as having the “same substance” (*homoousios*) as the Father. Further-more, he believes that the Holy Spirit is also fully God, and professes: “*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and lifegiver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.*” And so the creed we recite on Sunday is drawn up. In the eighth century, the Latin bishops add the term *filioque* (who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*). The Eastern Church’s objection to this addition becomes one of the big reasons for the split between the East and the West in 1054.

The Council of Constantinople, for the most part, ends the Arian heresy—the only exception being some of the tribes surrounding the Roman Empire. We will meet them in article 5.

Christological debates. After the issue of the equality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is settled, theological debate shifts to the person of Christ, a branch of theology called Christology. The main focus of the debate bears on the two natures of Christ, his divinity and humanity.

The *Alexandrian School* led by Bishop Cyril tends to *hold together* the divine and human natures of Christ: his perfect divinity so penetrates his human nature that results in internal unity. On the other hand, the *Antioch School* is more inclined *keep apart* the divine and human natures of Christ. Nestorius, patriarch bishop of Constantinople, belongs to the Antioch School.

The debate reaches a climax when Nestorius refuses to acknowledge Mary as the Mother of God. He holds that there are two *persons* in Christ—one divine, the other human, and that Mary is only *Christotokos*, mother of the human Jesus. St. Cyril of Alexandria (376-444) defends the title *Theotokos*, “God-bearer” or Mother of God.

The Council of Ephesus (431) is convened to deal with this debate which is causing huge internal division in the Church. The bishops of the Council declare that Nestorius is wrong and affirm the long-standing tradition of Christian prayer in which Mary is honored as the Mother of God. The Council is careful to state that Mary is the Mother

of God “according to the flesh” to clarify that Mary is *not* the source of Jesus’ divinity. It should be noted that this issue is not settled without fights, insults, exiles and accusations.

Council of Chalcedon (451). The dispute about the *natures* of Christ leads to yet another heresy *monophysitism* (Greek word for one nature). The heresy teaches that Christ has only *one* nature, that his human nature is absorbed into his divine nature “like a drop of honey into the water of the sea.” In effect, this heresy denies the humanity of Christ. Another Church council is convened, this time at Chalcedon, to deal with this latest threat to Catholic belief about who Jesus is. The Council declares: “Jesus exists *in two natures*, the divine and the human, which come together ‘without confusion or change, without division or separation’ to form the *one undivided person* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate.”

The teaching about the *two natures* of Jesus becomes known as the *hypostatic union*. Pope Leo I sends a letter called the *Tome* to the Council concerning the doctrine of the hypostatic union. When Leo’s *Tome* is read, the Council fathers proclaim that “*Peter had spoken through the mouth of Leo.*” Chalcedon affirms the teachings of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus. In the history of the Church’s beliefs about Jesus, these four councils are seen as hugely important. Their teachings of the four councils can be briefly summarized in the following way.

Statement	Council
<i>Christ is fully divine</i>	Council of Nicaea 325
<i>Christ is fully human</i>	Council of Constantinople 381
<i>Christ is a unified person</i>	Council of Ephesus 431
<i>Christ is human and divine in one person</i>	Council of Chalcedon 451

Unfortunately, just as some Christians reject the teachings of previous councils, others dismiss the teachings of Chalcedon. The continued belief of

Monophysitism leads to the formation of the **Coptic Church**, the largest Christian body in Egypt today.

Finally, it is important to state that creeds and other doctrinal statements that deal with the mysteries of our faith are *not* an attempt to *explain* a particular doctrine, but are rather statements of faith intended to *protect* the faith of the Church. If anyone teaches anything contrary to our creedal formulations, they are regarded as false teachers or heretics. Having said that, we can also say that it is the challenge to theologians in every age to find new and fresh ways to *express* in human language the ancient truths of our faith.

Pelagianism. Pelagius is a popular monk from Britain who taught in Rome around 405. He maintains that God’s grace is helpful but not essential for human salvation. He also denies that original sin intrinsically corrupted human nature. People do not inherit the sin of Adam. Rather they sin by imitating him. Pelagius in his teaching is reacting to the moral laziness he witnesses in Rome that absolves humans from personal responsibility of using their own free will to seek and attain a virtuous life. St. Jerome and St. Augustine are the chief opponents of Pelagianism. Augustine’s own experience rendered his free will and desire to do good totally powerless to deliver him from the bondage of sin. Only God’s free gift of grace can do this.

The Second Council of Orange in 529 approves a modified version of Augustine’s view, emphasizing an absolute need for God’s grace for one to do anything good, but also recognizing the necessity of *human cooperation* to accept God’s grace.

Many would say Pelagianism is alive and well in our culture today. Why? Because many people today are convinced that *we* control our own destinies. Many believe in the concept of the ‘self-made man.’ We are flooded with self-development courses and techniques to help people find their own peace, happiness and self-fulfillment without the need for God. Today, many believe that human nature can heal itself through its own power.

In contrast, Christianity teaches that salvation and inner peace cannot be achieved through human effort but rather through human *surrender* to God’s will and grace.

Monasticism – a new quest for holiness

Even before the Edict of Milan which ends the persecution of Christianity, some Christians start to flee from the world to escape the persecution of Diocletian. They live in caves and isolated places to deny themselves and live a life of simplicity and prayer.

After the end of the persecution of the Christian faith, many lay Christians continue to flee from the world to escape what they now see as a form of soft Christianity. These early seekers of a holy life totally dedicated to God become known as the *Desert Fathers*. They respond in a very radical way to Jesus' call to leave all things and follow him.

Two of the best known of these early monks are Anthony (251-356) and Pachomius (291-346). **Anthony** is often considered as the Father of Monasticism. Around 270 he fled to the desert and emerges around 305 as a great spiritual teacher. His friend St. Athanasius immortalizes Anthony's life by writing a biography of him. The book helps spread the monastic ideal to the Western world.

Pachomius, another Egyptian, founds a community of ascetics in the desert near the Nile River which gives birth to a new monastic way of life. These monks live near enough to each other to begin to share a common life of prayer and work. **St. Basil the Great** (329-379), a learned man prior to becoming a monk, draws up a **Rule** of life for monks who start to live in community. The **Rule** continues to be used by monks in the Eastern Church.

Around 371, **St. Martin of Tours** founds a monastery in Gaul (France). He is often called the Father of Western Monasticism. Two other Latin-speaking fathers of the Western Church in the fourth century, Sts. Augustine and Jerome, also live a part of their lives as monks.

But it was **Benedict of Nursia (480-547)** who is destined to leave the greatest mark on Western monasticism and become the patron saint of Europe. Son of a noble Roman family, Benedict as a young man becomes a hermit to get away from paganism, violence and a Church torn by schism. In 529 Benedict and his community of monks build on the heights of Monte Cassino (80 miles south of Rome) what is to become the most famous

monastery in all of Europe. This monastery, which today continues to be visited by large numbers of tourists, is self-sustaining so that the monks do not have to wander outside its walls. Not far from there, Benedict's twin sister, St. Scholastica (480-543), founds a monastery for women. The monks and nuns who come from ordinary life are taught to read so they can study the bible and read their daily prayers. They live a simple, practical form of monasticism, marked by prayer and work (*ora et labora*, in Latin).

Benedict is noted for his **Rule**, which in time will not only be used by Benedictine monks but also by many other monks. Building on the experience of monks like Pachomius, St. Basil, St. Jerome, and others, the *Rule of St. Benedict* is a practical approach to religious life based on moderation: two meals a day, a little wine, adequate clothing, and sufficient sleep. Benedictines take the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the abbot (for men) or abbess (for women), an office held for life. These vows and Benedict's *Rule* become the model for Western monasticism. They characterize religious community life in the Catholic Church to this day.

Benedict's Rule states: "*Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.*" The abbot is elected for life by the community. He should decide on major matters only after consulting with the whole community. He should "keep his own frailty ever before his eyes." The abbot should always remember that his role is to serve and that he should govern by example and not by dictate. If more leaders in Church and government adopted Benedict's *Rule*, we would have a better Church and society.

When St. Patrick evangelized the Irish, he brought with him a great love for the monastic life. He establishes many monasteries which become great centers of learning. Monks copy and illustrate sacred texts (e.g. *The Book of Kells*) thereby preserving Western learning during the times of the barbarian invasions that destroyed many important sacred texts. Gradually, Irish monks become missionaries in many parts of Europe.

St. Brigid, a contemporary of St. Patrick and a former slave of her own father, established several

convents in Ireland, including a unique double monastery—one for men and one for women.

Benefits and drawbacks of Monasticism

In his book *This is our Church*, Michael Pennock writes:

“There were many benefits to monasticism for the Church and society, including the following:

- *Economically self-sufficient monasteries provided the rural countryside a good example of land management and helped reestablish agriculture after the barbarian invasions.*
- *The monks taught respect for the liturgy and the value of prayer in daily life. Monasteries were spiritual beacons. They provided a countercultural response to a Christianity that had grown tepid.*
- *Monasteries were islands of stability in unsettled times. They gave refuge to travelers. And as centers of learning, they educated many future Church leaders who often administered secular affairs as well.*
- *As missionary centers, monasteries Christianized Europe. They kept Christianity alive and spread it.*

But monasticism did have some negative effects.

- *Monastic asceticism sometimes went overboard. For example, some monks engaged in self-mutilation to tame their weak human nature. St. Jerome praised celibacy so much that he ended up teaching that marriage is not a means to holiness, but a necessary evil.*
- *Monasticism taught a double standard of spirituality. The educated people in the Church were often monks who held the “religious life” as the only true model of holiness. A healthy lay spirituality was neglected for centuries” (p, 83).*

Discussion questions

1. What struck you most about the events described in this article?
2. How would you summarize Constantine’s impact on Christianity?

3. How can the church remain faithful to its prophetic role to be the critic of false and immoral forces in society without becoming a constant negative voice?

4. Have you ever found yourself questioning Jesus’ identity—that he was fully human and fully divine?

5. Do you agree that Pelagianism is alive and well in our world?

6. What value do you see in the monastic life today? How would you answer the assertion that ‘fleeing the world’ and family life is contrary to what Jesus calls us to do – to be engaged in the world?