

THE LATE MIDDLE AGES 1300 - 1517AD Decline of Christendom

In this article, we will look at:

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- Black Death
- Avignon Papacy
- Great Western Schism
- Mystics in the Middle Ages
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Decline of Christendom

The term Christendom refers to a time in the High Middle Ages when the Catholic Church and Western society were culturally, politically and religiously united. As we saw in the last article, Christendom reaches its peak during the papacy of Innocent III (1198-1216). Three factors contribute to the decline of Christendom: 1) the growth of nationalism which gradually leads Catholics to show stronger allegiance to their king than to their pope; 2) the plague called the Black Death which kills nearly a third of Europe's population; and 3) weak and corrupt papacy.

Two kings push back against the edicts of Boniface VII. In the 1300's, Western kingdoms gradually become states in the modern sense of the word, setting up a centralized system of government in the areas of finance and justice. The rulers of these developing nations start to exert their power and push back against any attempts by the papacy to control them. Not only that but these same nations set about asserting their own authority in the ecclesiastical affairs of their own territories. Two of these strong nations are England and France which engage in the Hundred Years War from 1337 to 1453.

To help pay for the cost of a long war, the kings of England and France levy a tax on clergy and their property. Pope Boniface VIII responds to this action by threatening to excommunicate anyone who tries to collect or pay tax without papal permission. King Edward of England counters by removing police protection from the clergy. King Philip of France refuses to recognize one of Boniface's candidates for bishop. Outraged at the direct challenge to his authority, Boniface issues a Papal Bull, asserting that popes are supreme over kings in both spiritual and

temporal matters. Undaunted, Philip sends his troops into Italy and has the pope arrested. Boniface dies a broken man at the age of 86. Philip's action in 1303 is a warning: strong kings will no longer take directions from a foreign pope.

Black Death (1347-1350)

The Black Death is the name given to a great plague which rages through Europe between 1347 and 1350. The bacteria of the plague is brought to Italy on merchants ships. In a few years, almost a third of Europe's population dies from the plague. Its victims are left blackened and disfigured. Since large numbers of clergy perish in the plague, many places are without a priest, and those that have, have newly ordained priests with very poor training. This situation reduces the people's esteem for the Church.

Sadly, *Jews* not only suffer greatly during the period of the Black Death but are also blamed for it. Despite the efforts of Pope Clement VI (1342-1352) and other rulers for three years (1348-1350), Jewish communities throughout Europe are uprooted and destroyed. In some towns, whole populations of Jews are burned; in others, they are expelled and their property confiscated. It has been estimated that over 200 Jewish communities, large and small, are destroyed.

The Fall of Constantinople. In Eastern Europe, the militant Muslim Turks capture the ancient Christian city of Constantinople. Thus in 1453, after more than a thousand years, "the second Rome" and capital of a once great empire falls. The Turks rename the city Istanbul. Many Byzantine scholars escape to the new town of Moscow in the newly united and independent Christian country of Russia.

Avignon Papacy (1307-1377)

During the fourteenth century, the papacy is located for 68 years not in Rome but in Avignon, a small town in Southern France. Later, this period in Church history becomes known as the "Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy." The term "Babylonian Captivity" refers back to a sad time in Jewish history when the Jews spent 70 years in exile in Babylon. How does the papacy end up in Avignon?

Recall that the French King Philip, buoyed up by a growing sense of nationalism, has Pope Boniface arrested when he tries to excommunicate the king for refusing to obey his edicts. Also at this time, Philip has been trying to turn the French church into a national institution with no loyalty to the pope. After the short reign of Boniface's successor, Philip manipulates the next conclave into electing a French Cardinal as pope, Clement V (1305-1314). Clement, under the sway of Philip, moves the papal residence to Avignon. Soon after, he appoints several new cardinals, all of them French and some of them relatives. The next six popes, all French, continue to hold residence in Avignon. While most of them try to live good lives and do the right thing, some opt for a luxurious lifestyle, settling in a magnificent palace provided by Philip. *All* of them dutifully bow to the wishes of the reigning French king.

The Avignon captivity weakens the papacy and causes divisions amongst the Catholic nations of Europe. Opponents of France see the Avignon papacy as just another arm of the French government. Also, being situated away from Rome, the Catholic Church has, in one sense, ceased to be *Roman*. Rome is the place where the first pope was martyred.

Gregory XI, the seventh Avignon pope, has been thinking of returning to Rome for several years when he is visited unexpectedly by Catherine of Siena (Italy), a 30-year old member of a Dominican lay order. Catherine is the recipient of many mystical visions. Her wisdom and holiness is so widespread that many Church and secular leaders come to her for advice.

Catherine's message to Gregory in 1376 is simple. While in prayer, she has perceived that God wants the pope back in Rome. Only in Rome can the pope bring peace between France and England, as well as among the warring Italian city-states.

Historians debate how much Catherine's plea influenced Gregory. But shortly thereafter in 1377, a year before his death, the pope brings the papacy back to Rome.

Great Western Schism (1378-1417)

One reason the French popes want to remain in Avignon is the unruly mobs and belligerent families of Rome who are trying to control papal elections. This is exactly what happens when Gregory dies in 1378. Mob pressure helps elect the Italian Urban VI. His abrasive and obnoxious personality grates on the

French cardinals who elected him. After a short time, these French cardinals claim that they were pressured into electing an Italian pope. They leave Rome, announce to the world that they made a mistake, depose Urban, and elect a Frenchman as the new pope. He takes the name Clement VII. He and his retinue of French cardinals return to Avignon.

Neither pope gives up his claim to the papal office. Upon their death, they are succeeded by other claimants to Peter's throne, each declaring his rivals illegitimate. Thus, the **Great Western Schism** results, a split that has confused Christians who do not know who the true Vicar of Christ is. Western Europe is divided between two rival popes. The French and Scots back Clement VII; the English and Germans back the Roman pope.

In 1409, some cardinals from both sides come together in a council in Pisa, Italy, and elect another anti-pope, Alexander V. The new pope thinks the other two popes would resign but they do not, so now the Church has three popes.

Eventually, the King of Bohemia convokes another **Church Council** in the Swiss city of **Constance** (1414-1418) to resolve the division in the Church. Pope Gregory XII, the Roman pope and recognized by the Church as the legitimate pope, sends legates to Constance to formally convoke the council and make it legitimate. He then resigns the papacy of his own free will. The council deposes the other two popes. In 1417, the cardinals and other representatives from five different nations elect a new pope, Martin V. His election ends a 30-year schism in the Church.

Joan of Arc (1412-1431). Called the "Maid of Orléans," Joan, a French peasant girl, starts to receive visions from Michael the Archangel and other saints at the age of thirteen. She is told that she is to save France, now involved in the Hundred Years War with the English. After initial reluctance, Joan is allowed by Charles, heir to the French throne, to lead troops into battle. She successfully rallies the French troops to end the English siege of Orléans.

Unfortunately, the next year, Joan is captured in battle and turned over to the English. She is accused by Church leaders of being a witch and burned at the stake on May 31, 1431. Twenty-five years later, Pope Callistus III declares that she was falsely condemned. She is canonized by Pope Benedict XV in 1920. What is most notable about Joan is her absolute obedience to God and her submission to his will especially at a time when it was unheard of for a

woman to be dressed in men's clothes and lead an army into battle.

Mystics in the late Middle Ages

As theology and philosophy become increasingly dry and detached from people's lives, God raises up a variety of people to fill the gap with writings that nourish the faithful's souls. Some of the best known spiritual writers and teachers of this period are:

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). Catherine is the twenty-third child of her parents. At a young age, she starts to have mystical visions which are recorded in her book *The Dialogue*. In a letter to Pope Gregory, she writes about her concerns for a papacy that has gotten off-track:

"Alas, what confusion is this, to see those who ought to be a mirror of voluntary poverty, meek as lambs, distributing the possessions of Holy Church to the poor: and they appear in such luxury and state and pomp and worldly vanity."

"Return to Rome.... Let not your holy desire fail on account of any scandal or rebellion of cities which you might see or hear."

"Be manly in my sight, and not timorous."

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). This priest would never have been known if his book *The Imitation of Christ* had not been found. The devotional was destined to become the most widely read Christian book after the Bible. It contains wisdom sayings on a wide variety of topics, e.g.:

"It is vanity to wish for a long life and care little about a well spent-life."

Be assured if you knew all you would pardon all."

The following beautiful prayer for guidance is attributed to Thomas.

*Grant me, Lord,
to know what I ought to know,
to love what I ought to love,
to praise what delights you most,
to value what is precious in your sight,
to hate what is offensive to you.*

*Do not allow me to judge according to
appearances,
not to pass sentence following the judgment
of the ignorant,*

*but to discern with true judgment
between things visible and spiritual,
and, above all things, to seek to know
what is the good pleasure of your will.
Amen.*

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), a German Dominican and one of the most influential mystics in the Middle Ages, is also a theologian and philosopher. Some of his sayings:

"If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

"God is at home, it is we who are out for a walk."

"The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

"You may call God love, you may call God goodness, but the best name for God is compassion."

"When you are thwarted, it is your own attitude that is out of order."

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), an English mystic, is an anchoress (a woman hermit dwelling in a room attached to a church). As her reputation for goodness and wise counsel spreads, all kinds of people come to talk to her through the window of her little room. At age thirty, Julian receives sixteen powerful visions which she records in a book called *Showings*. Some of her sayings:

"The greatest honor we can give God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love."

"Our Savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come."

Her best known saying is: *"And all shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."*

Gerard Groote (1340-1384) is a well-educated layman for much of his life. He is the founder of the *Brotherhood of Common Life* which has brought spiritual renewal to the lives of both clergy and laity. After spending three years in a monastery, he is ordained a deacon. Deacon Groote goes on to become a very powerful preacher.

If the Church's leaders had listened to and followed the exhortations of these wonderful men and women that God raised up in the years prior to the Protestant Reformation, there is a good chance that Martin Luther would not have broken with the Church.

Renaissance

Beginning in Italy in the late Middle Ages, a cultural rebirth rediscovers the ancient civilizations of Rome, Greece, and Egypt. Writers, architects, painters and artists apply ancient learning to the emerging Western Civilization. Historians call this new cultural movement the *Renaissance*, which literally means “rebirth.” Renaissance stresses the natural and the human. It emphasizes the pleasures of life, glorifies the human body, and celebrates education. Writing on how the Renaissance impacted religious life and the Church, Michael Pennock states:

Since human beings in all their natural glory were at the center of the Renaissance, the new outlook was given the name humanism. Most humanists were Christian. Eminent scholars like Erasmus of Rotterdam were interested in preserving and learning from classical texts and producing accurate translations of the Bible. They also encouraged the Church to return to her ancient roots and practice the simplicity of the Gospel. Artists celebrated the goodness of God’s creatures; works by masters like Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci are among the most beautiful creations ever made by humans. Writers like Dante created classics like the Divine Comedy, which details the Christian journey in an entertaining and educational allegory. At the same time, it highlights the corruption of clergy who were not taking appropriate care of God’s flock.

The Renaissance, in short, stressed the human more than the divine. Where the medieval world looked heavenward, the Renaissance highlighted human creativity. Although it brought about great advances in learning and unsurpassed achievements in art, the spirit of the Renaissance changed the way people thought about their world and the Church. During the Renaissance, the Church was no longer thought of as the only source of beauty, wisdom, and guidance.

The effects of the Renaissance created an atmosphere in Northern Europe that would lead to the Protestant Revolt. The ten Popes of this period, for example, heavily supported the lavish building projects, patronage of the arts, and military expeditions. Perhaps the most infamous Pope in history reigned during this time—Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503)—from the influential and infamous Borgia family. He used nepotism and simony as ways to enrich his family.

The Renaissance Popes were always in need of money to support their lavish lifestyles, building projects, patronage of the arts, and military expeditions. One of the ways the Church financed these projects was through the selling of indulgences, which were for the remission of time in Purgatory for sins that were already forgiven. (This is Our Church, pp 139-140)

Meanwhile, back in the pews . . .

Surprising as it may be, neither the Avignon Papacy, the Great Papal Schism, nor the corruption of the papal court in Rome destroy the faith of the common people in the pews. Most likely, due to a lack of modern-day social media, the vast majority of the ordinary faithful are unaware of the corruption in Rome. So they continue to believe in God, go to church and fervently pray for God’s protection from outbreaks of the plague.

Also during this period, the laity become more and more spectators at Mass which is said in Latin by the priest with his back to the people. Gazing with adoration at the host during Benediction becomes the laity’s main way of relating to the Eucharist. People receive Holy Communion so rarely that a law has to be introduced mandating that people receive communion once a year.

Because the theology of the time leads people to believe that God and Jesus are distant, many Christians turn to the saints to plead their cause. Devotion to Mary is very widespread and many shrines, feasts and special titles are created to revere her.

Discovery of a new world. The lure of adventure and a desire for new sources of trade motivate several explorations by Europeans in the mid 1400’s. Portuguese navigators explore the west coast of Africa and efforts are made to reach India. In 1492 an Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, stumbles upon a new world, as yet unknown to Europeans. We will hear more about this new world in later articles.

Reflection questions