

## **THE POPES AND FRANKS JOIN FORCES TO CREATE A NEW UNITY: CHRISTENDOM**

There is no better illustration of the perennial vitality of the papacy than its behavior in the crisis engendered by the fall of Rome. Confronted by the collapse of the imperial administration in the West, the disintegration of the Roman social order, and its attendant chronic insecurity, the Popes refused to despair. Turning their backs on the past and all nostalgic yearnings for a golden age, they accepted the fact that the barbarians had come to stay. Their new mission was now obvious: to convert the barbarians and incorporate them into a peaceful Christian society. It was to be a labor of centuries, but eventually their persevering efforts were rewarded. Slowly their vision of the future began to take shape, and out of the wreckage of the Roman Empire in the West a new social order came into being: Christendom. It was pre-eminently the creation of the Popes, but also owed much to the anonymous labors of the peaceful monks and the political prowess of the bellicose Franks. Gregory the Great laid its foundation at the end of the sixth century, but its full realization only occurred when Charlemagne accepted a crown from the hands of Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in the year 800.

Before describing in detail the work of papacy, monks, and Franks in the construction of Christendom, let us first review the main stages in the downfall of the Roman Empire in the West. The Empire's frontiers were finalized in the second century: to the North, the wall of Hadrian in Britain (on a line from Tyne to Solway) and the Rhine and Danube rivers; to the East, the Euphrates River in Syria; to the South, the natural frontiers of the Sahara Desert and the mountains of interior Africa; and to the West, the Atlantic Ocean. Constant pressure was put on the barriers in the North by the various restless Germanic tribes: the Franks on the lower Rhine, the Alemanni in southern Germany, the Vandals in Silesia, and the Visigoths in the Ukraine and southern Russia. Surging forward in wave after wave, they forced Rome to consume a large part of her economic resources in defense of her sagging walls.

It was finally the Ostrogoths who struck the fatal blow. Frightened by the hordes of Huns pouring out of the steppes of Russia, they stampeded and sought refuge behind the walls of the Empire. The Romans were not strong enough to hold them back. Once they were inside, hostility soon flared between the hosts and their unwelcome guests. A full-scale war ensued, and at Hadrianople in 378 the Goths massacred the imperial forces and left the Emperor, Valens, dead

on the battlefield. His death foreshadowed the doom of the Empire in the West.

Henceforth the barbarian tribes were free to move within the imperial boundaries and strike almost at will. The Vandals and Suevi crossed the Rhine in 406, and Rome itself was sacked by Alaric in 410. His successor established a Visigothic kingdom in southern Gaul; the Vandals conquered Africa; while the Franks, the Burgundians, and the Alemanni occupied the west bank of the Rhine and northern and central Gaul. Western Europe became a mosaic of Germanic kingdoms.

With the coming of these barbarians the Catholic Church fell on evil days, since the Goths and Vandals were Arians, having been converted by the Arian Bishop Ulfilas (d. 383). Wherever they took over, they persecuted the Catholics. Huneric, the Vandal ruler in Africa in 484, summoned the 466 Catholic bishops to a meeting with their Arian colleagues; at its conclusion his edict was read, which prohibited all assemblies of Catholics, confiscated their churches, and drove the bishops out of their sees. The Visigoths in Spain also severely restricted the freedom of the subjugated Gallo Roman populace. Everywhere, in fact, the Gallo-Roman Catholic populace was under the sway of persecuting Arian conquerors.

But Providence smiled on the Church in the person of Clovis, ruler of the Salian Franks. This belligerent prince had defeated the Roman ruler of northern Gaul in 486 and had established himself as the monarch of all Gallic territory north of the Loire River. A heathen rather than an Arian and by that very fact more acceptable to the Catholics of Gaul, he married a Catholic princess, Clotilda, and finally embraced the faith himself in 496, when he and three thousand of his men were baptized. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this baptism, for the Franks would "found the pontifical state, raise the Pope to royal rank, and by establishing the Carolingian empire, constitute the Christianity of the Middle Ages.'

Clovis was an insatiable warrior. By a series of conquests he was able to push his frontiers to the Alps, the Pyrenees, and the Rhine. His success was due not only to his military prowess but also to the Catholic bishops of many towns, who even, before his baptism opened their gates to him, since he was preferable to their Arian rulers.

In 511, shortly before his death, Clovis called a Council of the Gallic bishops at Orleans. He could take satisfaction in the completion of his life's work: Barbarians and Gallo-Romans were now united in one faith and one kingdom. With the help of the

bishops be had subjugated nearly the whole of Gaul, except the kingdoms of Burgundy, Provence, and Septimania. His codification of law, the Law of the Salian Franks, reflected his wisdom and the dominant influence of the Catholic bishops.

In the meantime, however, the Church and the papacy still suffered under the alien grip of the Arian Ostrogoths who had conquered Italy. A grand effort was made by Justinian, the ruler of the still independent Eastern Roman Empire, to reconquer the western territories. He began with Africa, where his great general, Belisarius, quickly overthrew the Vandals and liberated the Catholics. Turning toward Italy, he crossed over to Sicily in 535 and soon had Rome under his control. But the Ostrogoths showed more fire and

determination than the Vandals, and under their leader, Totila (d. 552), rallied and fought tenaciously for twenty years. By the time they were subdued, pillage, rapine, and famine had devastated the peninsula. It was the beginning of the Dark Ages for Rome and Italy.

Catastrophe struck again when in 568 the Lombards, another migrating Germanic tribe, crossed the Alps, seized Milan, and forced the archbishop to flee. They terrorized the populace and occupied northern Italy and gradually

advanced southward, where they unsuccessfully besieged Rome in 579. It was the final blow for the declining Roman civilization. No wonder many thought the end of the world was at hand.

Against this dark background there came to the throne of St. Peter one of its noblest occupants, later known as St. Gregory the Great (d. 604). A man of true genius, profound spirituality, and unflagging energy, he confirmed and defined long-standing trends and gave the papacy a direction it was to follow throughout the Middle Ages.

Gregory was born and reared in Rome with every possible advantage of birth and wealth. Rising to Rome's highest post, prefect of the city, he suddenly abandoned the world altogether, spent his vast wealth in founding monasteries, and converted his own palatial home into a monastery, where he lived a life of asceticism and study. He left his seclusion to serve as papal envoy to Constantinople, but after six years returned home to his monastery. He was forced into public life again, however, when the papal office fell vacant in 590 and the people of Rome clamored for him to become Pope. It was Gregory, as we said, who laid the foundations of medieval Christendom. To judge the truth of this statement we have only to consider the lasting influence of his four historic achievements: he established the Popes as de facto

rulers of central Italy; he strengthened the papal primacy over the churches of the West; he immensely furthered the work of converting the barbarians and initiated the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, and he left behind a corpus of theological and spiritual writings that had a tremendous influence on the shaping of medieval thought. Let us consider them in order.

In view of the inability of the Eastern Roman Empire to stop the pillaging Lombards in the West, Gregory assumed the responsibility of feeding the Roman populace, of repairing the walls, and of mustering the troops. Several times by diplomatic maneuvers, he saved Rome from sack by the Lombards, and he finally led the way in bringing about a general peace. In this way in default of any strong leadership from the civil authorities, he became the ruler of central Italy and prepared the way for papal control of the papal states.

While recognizing the rights of the other patriarchates Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Jerusalem—he vigorously intervened in the life of the other churches of his own Western patriarchate. In accordance with his dictum, "I know of no bishop who is not subject to the Apostolic See when fault has been committed," he corresponded incessantly with bishops and monks, advising them about their administrations

and the enforcement of discipline. And though churches like those of Gaul and Spain still maintained a practical independence, he accustomed them by the sheer weight of his moral and spiritual authority to look to Rome for special guidance.

A delightful tale relates how Gregory first conceived the mission to the Angles and Saxons. While walking near the Roman slave market, he spotted some youthful Angles for sale and noted sadly that such bright-looking lads should be slaves of darkness. "When told they were Angli" he replied that they had the faces of angeli (angels) and should be coheirs with them in heaven. They were from Deira? Again he responded with a pun: They must be saved from de ira Dei (the wrath of God). Their King was named "Aelle?" "Alleluia," Gregory exclaimed, should be chanted in the land!

Later, as Pope, he personally commissioned a Roman monk named Augustine to convert the Angles and Saxons and was elated at the speedy conversion of King Aethelbert of Kent. The Pope maintained a close relationship with the new Church—a prototype of the relationship that for nearly a thousand years remained a marked characteristic of the English Church. Later, when missionaries such as the great Boniface (d. 754) went in their turn from England to convert inner

Germany, they worked in a spirit of filial submission to Rome. In consequence, the whole of Western Europe was brought into a close relationship with Rome.

Gregory was also able to link the Spanish Church more closely with Rome. Shortly before his accession to the papal throne, Recared, the Visigothic King, abjured Arianism after hearing a debate between the Arian and Catholic bishops and embraced the Catholic faith at a great synod at Toledo in 589. A letter announcing the historic event reached the new Pope shortly after his coronation, and Gregory sent Recared relics of the chains of St. Peter. Gregory also prepared the way for the eventual conversion of the Lombards by his diplomacy and his close friendship with Theodolinda, the Queen of two successive Lombard rulers, Authari and Agilulf. So Gregory set the papacy and the Church on a path that was to make it the predominant force in shaping a new civilization out of the ruins of the old—a new political and cultural and social unity called Europe. In alliance with the Franks and aided by the monks, his successors would continue—with some notable interruptions—his effort in laying the groundwork for a distinctively Christian political and social order.

After the papacy, the most important spiritual force in the making of Catholic Europe were the monks. The role of the monks is directly related to the breakdown of

city life that accompanied the dissolution of the Empire. Now an agrarian economy and rural society prevailed, providing a grave challenge to the Western Church since, unlike the Church in the Eastern Empire, it was still largely an urban religion, with little influence over the peasants in the countryside.

It was the monks who provided an ideal solution to the problem. Their monasteries, located in the countryside, proved to be very effective centers of the missionary activity among the heathen folk. This was the lesson provided by the life of Martin of Tours (d. 397), who was not only the founder of Gallic monasticism but also the greatest missionary to rural France.

The monastic movement had its biggest impact on the newly converted Celtic lands of the Far West, where it was introduced by St. Patrick (c. 461). The social unit here was the tribe and not the city, and so from the start the Church was organized along monastic rather than episcopal lines. Monasteries rather than episcopal cities became the normal centers of ecclesiastical life as well as great schools of learning. The leaders of Celtic Christianity were the famous abbots like St. Samson, St. Illtyd, St. Cadoc, St. Gildas, and St. David, or in some cases even abbesses.

These Irish monks were the leading missionaries of the age, and they carried their monastic ideal across

the length and breadth of Europe in the sixth and seventh centuries: Luxeuil, founded by Columbanus around 590; [umieges in France; Stavelot and Malmedy in Belgium; St. Gall in Switzerland; and Bobbio in Italy were all founded by Irish monks. They proved to be the indispensable means of Christianizing the peasants, whose life and work the monks shared. The monks cleared the forests and put back into cultivation much of the land desolated by the barbarians. But more important, the monks completely remolded the peasant culture in the spirit of the new religion. The sacred wells, sacred trees, and sacred stones were still revered, only now they were associated with Christian saints.

Up to this point the dominant kind of monasticism was the Irish type, as codified by Columbanus, which closely imitated its Egyptian prototype, with its emphasis on asceticism and the eremetical life. But its very success pointed up its defects: its lack of strong authority, its excessive rigor as to mortification, its failure to specify a balanced schedule. There was need for another type of rule more suited to the Western temperament. The man who provided it was St. Benedict, who founded the monastery of Monte Cassino around 520. His Rule reflects the Latin genius for organization. It quickly spread, becoming the universal form of Western monasticism. No single

person, except Gregory the Great, did more than Benedict to stabilize the barbarian peoples and plant the Church solidly in their midst.

Benedictine monks brought Christianity to England (Augustine came from Pope Gregory's Benedictine monastery, and the great English Benedictine abbeys—Ripon, Hex. ham, Wearmouth, and Jarrow—proved to be centers not only of missionary activity but also of a new vital Christian culture that arose in the years between 650 and 680. During the eighth century the Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monks were outstanding for their religion, scholarship, and literature amid the general state of decadence.

It was also Benedictine monks who proved to be the most powerful force for the papalization of the West. Intensely devoted to Rome and the papacy, they were the chief agents of the Popes in the ecclesiastical reforms of the eighth century. The most notable example was Winfrid (d. 754), later called St. Boniface, the "Apostle of Germany," founder of the medieval German Church. Sent by the Pope as his vicar and assisted by bands of Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns, he uprooted German heathenism and established abbeys and bishoprics.

Boniface was also instrumental in preparing the way for the alliance of the papacy and the Franks that was to be decisive for the future of Europe and the

creation of Latin Christendom. The opportunity to do this was given him by the Frankish King, who invited him to reform the Frankish Church, which by this time had lapsed into a state of corruption. In a great series of councils between 742 and 747, Boniface led a successful effort to revive discipline and forge strong links between Rome and the Franks. This activity was consummated in 754, when the alliance of the papacy and the Frankish monarchs was sealed. To understand how this happened, one must keep in mind the situation of the papacy since Gregory I. Gregory had become the actual ruler of Rome and the surrounding territory in a process that was duplicated in many cities in the barbarianized West. The bishop was often looked up to by the people as their natural leader, and he was able to devote the vast resources of the Church to the public welfare. This was especially true of Rome, whose supposed ruler was the distant exarch at Ravenna, the vicar of the Eastern Roman Emperor. But the actual ruler was the Pope, the exarch being only a shadowy, ineffectual figure compared to the bishop of Rome. By the time the Lombards occupied Ravenna in 751 and chased the exarch out, it really didn't matter, for the Pope had long since been recognized as the only effective ruler of non-Lombard Italy.

It was the Pope then who had to deal with the Lombard problem. Though converted to the Church, the Lombards still nurtured the ambition of making themselves masters of the whole Italian peninsula. This was something the Pope was determined not to allow. Since his own forces were obviously not adequate to stem the Lombard advance, the Pope turned to the Franks for help. This was a wise move for several reasons: First, Boniface's reform of the Frankish Church had greatly strengthened its bonds with Rome; second, the Franks lived at a distance and hence would not be, it was held, in a position to dominate the papacy; and finally, Pepin (d. 768), their ruler, had recently indebted himself to the Popes, having asked and received papal sanction for his seizure of the crown from the descendants of Clovis. The Pope's act strengthened the King's authority, and Pepin was grateful.

So with Rome at the mercy of the Lombards, Pope Stephen II, a Roman of noble blood, set out on a journey of unparalleled historical importance. He crossed the Alps in mid. October 753 and met the King at Ponthion, on Epiphany 754; the Frankish monarch dismounted and prostrated himself before the Pope and then took the bridle and led the papal horse forward. In the conference that followed, Pepin

guaranteed the Pope's rule over a large portion of Italy, from

Parma and Mantua to the borders of Apulia, including the former exarchate of Ravenna. In effect, he constitutionally established a dominion of the Pope that was recognized in public law and possessed of independent status. In turn the Pope anointed Pepin and his two sons, Charles and Carloman, and granted them the title "Patricians of the Romans."

"This was an epoch-making event, for it marked not only the foundation of the papal state which was to endure until 1870, but also the protectorate of the Carolingians in Italy and the beginning of their imperial mission as leaders and organizers of Western Christendom," historian Christopher Dawson has noted.<sup>2</sup> This donation of Pepin had to be ratified by force of arms when Aistulf, the Lombard leader, refused to recognize it. After subjugating Aistulf, Pepin took the keys to the liberated cities and placed them together with his written donation on the tomb of St. Peter.

On the eve of his death in 768, Pepin divided his realm between his two sons. When Carloman died in 771, Charles took over as sole ruler. As patrician or protector of the Romans he was soon called on to carry out his responsibilities. He had to march against Desiderius, the Lombard ruler who had attacked

Rome. He crushed Desiderius and made himself King of the Lombards, though he never succeeded in completely mastering them. Their duchy of Benevento in the South was able to keep its independence. In that same year (773) he made a solemn entry into the Eternal City, embraced the Pope on the steps of St. Peter's, and renewed the donation of his father confirming the Pope in his possession of the papal states. But Charles soon showed that he intended to act as the Pope's sovereign as well as his protector. He issued orders to the Pope and supervised the administration of the states.

His biographer, Einhard, described Charles as huge in stature, physically vigorous, a tender father, affable and popular with his subjects, a man of profound Christian conviction and imbued with a strong sense of a God-given mission to unify the peoples of the West under the Christian banner.

With this in mind he engaged in countless military campaigns on all the frontiers of his empire, extending his rule over the larger part of Western Europe. In the Southwest he struck against the Arabs and fortified his frontier along the Pyrenees; in the Southeast he incorporated Bavaria into his kingdom, and by his defeat of the Avars he prepared the way for the Frankish colonization of present-day Austria and parts of Hungary. But his most important conquest was

in the East. Here for thirty-two years he fought the heathen Saxon and, in spite of repeated setbacks, finally managed to subject them to the Christian faith and his own political authority.

This meant that the broad German plains as far as the Elbe were incorporated permanently into his realm. Then he rounded off these conquests with campaigns against the Slavs.

By the year 800 his realm stretched from the Atlantic to southern Italy, from the Pyrenees to the Elbe-virtually reconstituting the political unity of the Western Roman Empire. But his title was still "King of the Franks and Lombards and Patrician of the Romans." Would it not be fitting, some wondered, to call him "Emperor" also? The answer was given on the occasion of his visit to Rome in the year 800 where he had to investigate some grave accusations=adultery and perjury-leveled against the reigning Pope, Leo III (d. 816). While not subject to trial, the Pope was only able to clear himself by publicly swearing on the Gospels his innocence in the royal presence.

And so it happened that sometime later, on Christmas Day, Charles was present at Mass in St. Peter's when suddenly Leo set a crown on his head while the whole assembly roared out, "Hail to Charles the Augustus, crowned of God, the great and peace-bringing Emperor of the Romans"

The wording of the acclamation should be noted: He was "crowned of God." The act was regarded as the will of God, who had acted through the Pope. This theocratic idea was to remain an essential mark of the new Empire, and it was therefore "Holy." Second, it referred to him as Emperor of the "Romans," showing that it was regarded as the continuation of the Roman Empire.

Charles himself, it seems, was taken by surprise and was even reluctant to accept the title at first. Perhaps he disliked the implication that the Pope could confer such a dignity; perhaps he feared trouble with the Eastern Emperor, who might see it as an act of rebellion. In any case, the deed was done. Charles was Emperor, and it was the Pope who had crowned him. The alliance of the Franks and papacy was gloriously consummated. Gregory, Benedict, and Boniface had not labored in vain. Christendom was now a reality. A new era began in the history of the West and of Rome.