



## EARLY CHRISTIANITY

By the middle of the fifth century, Christianity was the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, and essential doctrines had been well defined through the actions of synods and especially four great councils. The church had attained great wealth, and its leaders were among the most important persons of the Empire. By this time there was also a rich Christian tradition preserved in liturgy, art, and stories of its holy men and women. To understand this extraordinary growth and development and its importance for the Middle Ages, we need to go back to the infancy of Christianity.

### THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

We saw in chapter 1 that the four canonical Gospels tell the story of Jesus and his earliest followers. As we have already suggested, these documents were not written as historical accounts in the modern sense, and so not surprisingly there is considerable debate among scholars today about how historically accurate they are. Our chief sources for the history of the earliest Christian communities are Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. Together they present a picture of both teaching and practice in the years following Christ's earthly ministry. Immediately after Jesus' Passion and resurrection, there were few who accepted him as the long-awaited Messiah. Acts of the Apostles suggests that they may not have been more than 120 in all. Yet within just a few years, several thousand Jews in and around Jerusalem came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. After the conversion and apostleship of Paul (c. 33 C.E.) came the initiative to take the "Good News" about Jesus among the Gentiles (non-Jews) in the eastern Mediterranean. Paul began his Christian ministry preaching Christ to the Jews but found that most of them rejected his message:

It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to [Jews]. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For the Lord has commanded us [Paul and his

companion Barnabas], saying, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, So that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." (Acts 13:46-47; last two lines are taken from Isaiah 49:6)

Paul taught these Gentile Christian converts that they were not obligated to follow Jewish practices such as circumcision and dietary regulations. Although most of the earliest Christian communities contained both Gentiles and practicing Jews, within two or three generations the vast majority of Christians were Gentiles; Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah often no longer were welcome in synagogues. Furthermore, by the end of the first century C.E., Christianity was no longer centered in Palestine, although this is in large part because of the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. after a Jewish revolt against Roman rule.

This predominantly Gentile church (the Greek word *ecclesia*, the word that is translated as "church," means "assembly") was becoming a separate religion. This development is of the greatest significance in Christian history, for Christ was a Jew, and his earliest followers were Jews who adhered to the laws of the Old Testament. The period of the separation of Judaism and Christianity saw the development of both anti-Christian and anti-Jewish attitudes. It is fair to say that in some Christian writings of that time and the following centuries we see the beginnings of Christian dislike and denunciation of the beliefs and practices of Judaism. Certain anti-Jewish beliefs became firmly implanted in Christianity and were one aspect of Christian thought throughout the Middle Ages and far beyond. One early passage that illustrates the beginnings of anti-Semitism is found in the letter of Saint Ignatius of Antioch (martyred 107) to the Magnesians:

So lay aside the old good-for-nothing leaven [of the Old Testament], now grown stale and sour, and change to the new, which is Jesus Christ. . . . To profess Jesus Christ while continuing to follow Jewish customs is an absurdity. The Christian faith does not look to Judaism, but Judaism looks to Christianity, in which every other race and tongue that confesses a belief in God has now been comprehended.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the separation from Judaism, Christians continued to accept the Old Testament as the revealed word of God, although they followed Paul in giving a specifically Christian meaning to it, that is, they saw the events of the Old Testament in terms of their relationship to Christianity.

Perhaps even in Paul's lifetime, there were some converts to Christianity who attempted to combine their new religion with a philosophy that had developed in the eastern part of the Roman Empire called Gnosticism. Although not all Gnostics held identical beliefs, a basic tenet is the opposition between the material and spiritual realms. Gnostics saw material things as intrinsically evil and spiritual things as intrinsically good. Thus, a common Gnostic view of

the story of creation in Genesis was that it is about an evil god or a rebellious spirit, since it is the story of the making of evil things. Gnostics interpreted the New Testament to be about a pure spirit who only appeared to be human. Most Christians saw Gnostic interpretations of Scripture as both erroneous and dangerous. The general Christian rejection of Gnostic interpretations of Scripture, however, did not mean that the philosophy of Gnosticism ceased to impact the development of Christianity. In the fourth century, for example, the young Augustine, before his conversion to Christianity, was an adherent of a non-Christian Gnostic sect called the Manichees (after the Gnostic teacher Mani). Although Augustine unequivocally renounced his Manichean beliefs (see chapter 4), some scholars have argued that certain views of Augustine and other Church Fathers, especially on forms of asceticism, can be traced to Gnostic views. As late as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was something of a revival of Christian Gnosticism in southern France and northern Italy called the Albigensian (after the French city of Albi) or Cathar movement (from a Greek word meaning "the pure ones"). The impact of this movement led to the calling of a crusade against other Christians and influenced Pope Innocent III's decision to establish a new religious order founded by Francis of Assisi (see chapter 12). As late as the fourteenth century, there were remnants of the Cathars in villages in the Pyrenees.<sup>2</sup>

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHURCH OFFICES

In the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem, according to Acts of the Apostles, the apostles handled all the work of the community, from preaching to presiding at liturgical ceremonies to caring for the goods held in common. As the community grew, a certain specialization soon became necessary. Furthermore, as Christian communities developed over time in cities around the Mediterranean, the problem of unity within a community became acute, especially when there were differences of opinion about who Jesus was and how to follow him faithfully. At first, it was possible to refer disputes to persons of great authority such as the apostles or Paul. But how were differences to be resolved and unity preserved when the apostles were no longer alive?

One solution to the problem of unity within a community was to designate a single person, someone who had received the authority to preside at rituals and was often called a priest, as the spokesman for and arbiter within a community, and this chief priest would also appoint (later ordain) new priests. This official came to be called the bishop (in Greek, *episcopos*; hence words such as "episcopal" and "episcopacy").

Since many regarded direct commission by Christ or personal inspiration from God as the only legitimate bases of authority in the Church, the question

of the source of episcopal power was an important one in early Christian communities. The principle of apostolic succession, which was already being formulated by the end of the first century, was the generally accepted solution. Simply, apostolic succession means that the authority that Christ conferred upon the apostles is passed on to properly chosen successors—that is, Christ established offices rather than merely giving authority to individuals. The bishops' claim to obedience is explicit in Ignatius of Antioch's (d. 107) letter to a Christian community in Asia Minor:

Your obedience to your bishop, as though he were Jesus Christ, shows me plainly enough that yours is no worldly manner of life, but that of Jesus Christ Himself, who gave His life for us that faith in His death might save you from death. At the same time, however, essential as it is that you should never act independently of the bishop—as evidently you do not—you must also be no less submissive to your clergy [i.e., priests], and regard them as apostles of Jesus Christ our Hope, in whom we shall one day be found, if our lives are lived in Him.<sup>3</sup>

Some bishops came to be regarded as especially important because they were leaders of Christian communities first headed by apostles; thus their succession to the apostles was uniquely direct. In particular, the bishop of Rome (from the fifth century on usually called the pope, from a Latin word meaning "father") was so regarded because it was believed that Peter, the so-called prince of the apostles, established and headed the Christian community there. Both Peter and Paul, the apostles respectively to the Jews and Gentiles and thus together to all people, were martyred and buried in Rome. It must also have seemed natural for Christians to look to Rome, since it was the political center of the world. In addition, of all the apostolic sees (seats of bishops), Rome was the only one in the Latin-speaking West while there were three in the Greek East that were sometimes at odds with one another (see chapter 5). Sometimes other bishops would ask advice from the bishop of Rome because of the prestige of his office as the leading bishop of the Empire, the first among equals. As early as the latter part of the second century, we find a description of the special importance of the see of Rome in a treatise by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (d. c. 200):

But since it would be very long in such a volume as this to enumerate the successions of all the churches, I can by pointing out the tradition which that very great, oldest, and well-known Church, founded and established at Rome by those two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul, received from the apostles, and its faith known among men, which comes down to us through the successions of bishops, put to shame all of those who in any way, either through wicked self-conceit, or through vainglory, or through blind and evil opinion, gather as they should not. For every church must be in harmony

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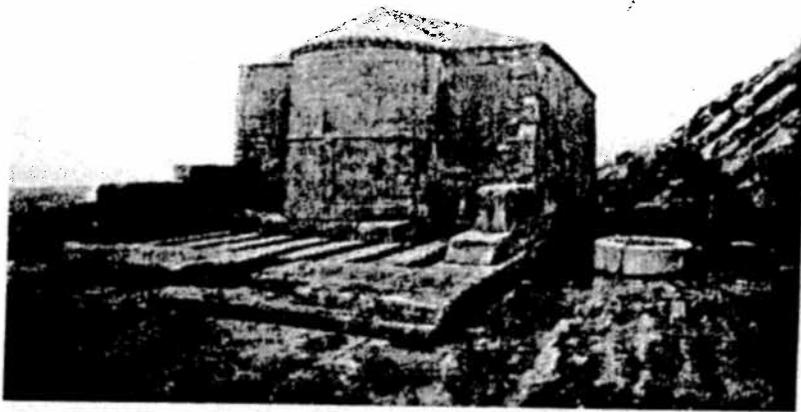
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with this Church because of its outstanding pre-eminence, that is, the faithful from everywhere, since the apostolic tradition is preserved in it by those from everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

By the fifth century, a full-fledged theory of papal jurisdictional supremacy emerged. We must not equate the development of this idea with a claim that all Christians were required to use the same practices or that Rome would dictate to regional and local churches. Pope Leo I (the Great, r. 440–61) is perhaps most responsible for the so-called Petrine theory (derived from the name Peter), the ultimate foundation of claims of papal supremacy. Leo argued from Matthew 16:18–19 (see chapter 1 for the text) that Peter received the power to govern the Church from Christ and that this power was inherited by Peter's successors. Peter was believed to have founded and led the Christian community in Rome; consequently, the bishops of Rome were his successors. Leo's claim was recognized by the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Council of Chalcedon) in 451: "Peter has spoken through Leo." Leo explained the meaning of Matthew 16:18–19 in a sermon preached in 443:

The dispensation of Truth therefore abides, and the blessed Peter persevering in the strength of the Rock, which he has received, has not abandoned the helm of the Church, which he undertook. For he was ordained before the rest in such a way that from his being called the Rock, from his being pronounced the Foundation, from his being constituted the Doorkeeper of the kingdom of heaven, from his being set as the Umpire to bind and to loose, whose judgments shall retain their validity in heaven, from all these mystical titles we might know the nature of his association with Christ. And still today he more fully and effectually performs what is entrusted to him, and carries out every part of his duty and charge in Him and with Him, through Whom he has been glorified. And so if anything is rightly done and rightly decreed by us, if anything is won from the mercy of God by our daily supplications, it is of his works and merits whose power lives and whose authority prevails in his See.... For throughout the Church Peter daily says, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), and every tongue which confessed the Lord, accepts the instruction his voice conveys.<sup>5</sup>

In some sense, Leo's claim is a specific application of the principle of apostolic succession, that is, the authority that Christ conferred upon Peter is specifically passed on to Peter's successors as leaders of the Roman Church. It is important to note that Leo was not claiming personal infallibility but rather universal jurisdiction in the Church. This means that he is the final voice in settling disputes among bishops, disputed elections to ecclesiastical offices, and similar sorts of controversies. Although the Petrine theory was well defined after the mid-fifth century, it was a theory that was not universally accepted, especially in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire (see chapter 5).



*Church of San Biagio, Agrigento, Sicily, Twelfth century. This church was built directly upon the remains of an ancient Greek temple of the fifth century B.C.E. dedicated to Demeter and Persephone, visually demonstrating that Christians consciously built upon the foundations of classical antiquity. The foundation is easy to see here because the temple was larger than the church.*

### CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN

Christianity was born in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the Roman Empire and appeared soon after in the Latin-speaking West. Since the entire New Testament was written in Greek, Christianity from its beginnings coexisted and interacted with the thought and writings of the Greeks and Romans. The inevitable tensions between Christianity and the world of classical learning intensified in the third century. Many of the earliest Christian converts had come from the lower strata of society, including a significant number of slaves. The instability of the Empire after 180 and a changing and generally more pessimistic world view developing in the late second and third centuries provided a context for the conversion of significant numbers of educated, prominent people to Christianity. Such converts did not simply abandon all knowledge they had accumulated in pagan schools, and consequently they were often interested in defining the relationship between pagan learning and Christian revelation. Justin Martyr, toward the end of the second century, had argued that much of the wisdom of the great pagan thinkers was compatible with Christian teaching. He even believed that men such as Socrates had some limited revelation from God and, like the great Old Testament figures, were "Christians before Christ."<sup>6</sup> In Alexandria, the center of Greek learning, the study of pagan works and the use of classical tools of critical scholarship were

first put to the service of Christianity. The foundation had been prepared in part by a group of Greek-speaking Jewish philosophers, the most important of whom was Philo (20 B.C.E.–50 C.E.), who were concerned with reconciling Jewish tradition and Greek thought.

The most important Christian scholar of this era was Origen (d. 254). Some of his theological speculations, such as his belief that at the end all people would be saved, led to controversies over his writings for centuries after his death, including several formal condemnations, partly because his followers often went beyond what he himself had said. Here, we shall be concerned with three facets of Origen's work that were influential in the development of Christian thought. First, he was a firm believer in the use of reason and hence the value for Christians of pagan learning. Here is Origen's reply to a letter of praise from one of his students:

Your natural aptitude is sufficient to make you a consummate Roman lawyer and a Greek philosopher too of the most famous schools. But my desire for you has been that you should direct the whole force of your intelligence to Christianity as your end.... And I would wish that you should take with you on the one hand those parts of the philosophy of the Greeks which are fit, as it were, to serve as general or preparatory studies for Christianity, and on the other hand so much of Geometry and Astronomy as may be helpful for the interpretation of Holy Scriptures. The children of the philosophers speak of geometry and music and grammar and rhetoric and astronomy as being ancillary to philosophy; and in the same way we might speak of philosophy itself being ancillary to Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

Second, Origen recognized the need for accurate texts and translations of Scripture. His use of the tools of textual criticism was of great influence generally and on Saint Jerome in particular. Third, Origen himself was a great interpreter of Scripture. He rejected simple literal readings, since as a scholar he recognized obvious historical discrepancies and impossibilities; rather, he emphasized the allegorical levels of interpretation as most important:

There is something else that we must realize. The main aim of scripture is to reveal the coherent structure that exists at the spiritual level in terms both of events and injunctions. Wherever the Word [Christ] found that events on the historical plane corresponded with these mystical truths, he used them, concealing the deeper meaning from the multitude. But at those places in the account where the performance of particular actions as already recorded did not correspond with the pattern of things at the intellectual level, Scripture wove into the narrative, for the sake of the more mystical truths, things that never occurred—sometimes things which never could have occurred, sometimes things that could have but did not.... It was not only in the relation of events before the coming of Christ that the Spirit arranged things in this way. Because he is the same Spirit and comes from the one God, he has acted

in the same way with the gospels and the writings of the apostles. Even they contain a narrative that is not at all points straightforward; for woven into it are events which in the literal sense did not occur. Nor is the content of the law and commandments to be found in them entirely reasonable.<sup>8</sup>

The idea that Scripture, especially the Old Testament, contains allegory can be traced back to Paul. However, Origen created a rational, systematic approach to interpreting Scripture allegorically; he goes farther than most Church Fathers—a general term used to designate all major orthodox Christian writers before c. 600—in admitting the possibility that even the New Testament contains material that may be historically untrue. Later biblical commentators borrowed much from Origen in presenting their own theories of biblical exegesis. Both Jerome and Augustine used allegorical interpretations, often derived directly from Origen, but combined with a firmer belief in the historical truth of Scripture.

Not all Christians shared Justin's and Origen's enthusiasm for pagan learning. A North African Latin-speaking Christian named Tertullian (d. c. 220) believed that the truth of Scripture so excelled that of the pagan writings as to render the latter useless. He also argued that Christians should separate themselves as much as possible from pagan society in order not to be corrupted by it:

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the Academy [Plato's school in Athens] with the Church?... We have no need for curiosity since Jesus Christ, nor for inquiry since the Gospel.... Tell me what is the sense of this itch for idle speculation? What does it prove, this useless affectation of a fastidious curiosity, notwithstanding the strong confidence of its assertions? It was highly appropriate that Thales, while his eyes were roaming the heavens in astronomical observation, should have tumbled into a well. This mishap may well serve to illustrate the fate of all who occupy themselves with the stupidities of philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian went farther than his rejection of classical culture and seemed to reject reason itself in his famous phrase, "I believe because it is absurd."<sup>10</sup> Even in the very language of his condemnations, however, Tertullian is using the satire and invective developed by pagan Latin writers. Even though he turned it against the pagans themselves, he was able to do so only because of his classical education. Although few Christian writers followed Tertullian's extreme negative view with regard to the value of pagan learning, he represents an uneasiness and fear of knowledge not drawn directly from Scripture that was an element in the thought of many more moderate Christians.

Tertullian and Origen represent the two extremes in their attitude toward the pagan world's achievements. Most of the writers influential for the Middle Ages, such as Jerome and Augustine, fall somewhere in between. In various forms, the debate about the value of pagan learning for Christians continued throughout the Middle Ages and also remains a part of contemporary discussions,

for example, in debates about evolution and creationism. The issue, though in a more nuanced form, was central in disputes such as those between Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard in the twelfth century and between some Franciscan and Dominican theologians in the thirteenth.

### PERSECUTION AND TRIUMPH

The early Church faced persecution. According to the Gospels, Christ himself was put to death by a Roman governor under pressure from Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The apostles and their followers in Jerusalem faced the possibility of persecution once they became numerous enough to be a perceived threat to Judaism by the religious leaders. The first Christian martyr was Stephen, killed by Jews c. 35, and Luke recorded the story of his death in Acts of the Apostles:

[At Stephen's preaching the Jews] covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul [later Paul]. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7:57-60)

Stephen's last words are meant to remind the reader of Christ, who uttered similar words of forgiveness to his killers from the cross. Often images of Stephen in medieval art show him holding a rock or with a rock striking his head.

The most famous of the early persecutions of Christians, and the first launched by a Roman emperor, took place during the reign of Nero. He had been accused of having started a great fire in Rome in the year 64 in order to clear an area where he wished to build a grand new house—the origin of the old saying that Nero fiddled while Rome burned—and he needed a scapegoat. So he blamed the fire on the small, weak, and unpopular Christian community, which he understood to be a sect of Judaism. The persecution was confined to Rome and was not an attempt to wipe out the infant religion. However, both Peter and Paul were probably martyred during this persecution, Peter in the circus of Nero near a place called the Vatican, where three hundred years later a great basilica was built in his honor.

For almost two hundred years after Nero, there were scattered Christian persecutions, but all were short-lived and local. Most occurred in response to local problems (a bad crop, for example, where the populace may have believed that the Roman gods were punishing them for tolerating nonworshippers in their midst) or because the Christians were so different from other Roman citizens. Christians generally did not attend the cruel entertainments so popular with the masses or offer sacrifices to the Roman gods, considered as much a

patriotic as a religious act in imperial times. While many early Christians were pacifists and refused to serve in the army, ironically Christianity was spread in part by Christian soldiers stationed all over the Empire. Sometimes Christians were harassed by being "rounded up" for questioning. Probably the attitude of the emperor Trajan (r. 98–117) was typical of imperial policy toward Christians in this period. In the following text, he is answering a provincial governor who had expressed concern about the Christian "problem":

You have acted quite properly, Pliny [called Pliny the Younger, the governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia], in examining the case of those Christians brought before you. Nothing definite can be laid down as a general rule. They should not be hunted out. If accusations are made and they are found guilty, they must be punished. But remember that a man may expect pardon from repentance if he denies that he is a Christian, and proves this to your satisfaction, that is by worshipping our gods, however much you may have suspected him in the past. Anonymous lists should have no part in any charge made. That is a thoroughly bad practice, and not in accordance with the spirit of the age.<sup>11</sup>

Among the second-century martyrs was Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107). In surviving letters, he suggests his willingness to die for his faith, his conviction that martyrdom was the surest way to heaven, and his recognition that to die for Christ was the closest possible imitation of Christ's own passion:

All the ends of the earth, all the kingdoms of the world would be of no profit to me; so far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of the earth's widest bounds. He who died for us is all that I seek; He who rose again for us is my whole desire. The pangs of birth are upon me; have patience with me, my brothers, and do not shut me out from life, do not wish me to be stillborn. Here is one who only longs to be God's; do not make a present of him to the world again, or delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, light pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the Passion of my God.<sup>12</sup>

Another second-century martyr was Polycarp (d. 155). An excellent account of his martyrdom survives, but perhaps the most important aspect of the text is the description of what the pious Christians did after his death:

So, after all, we did gather up his bones—more precious to us than jewels, and finer than pure gold—and we laid them to rest on a spot suitable for that purpose. There we shall assemble, as occasion allows, with glad rejoicings; and with the Lord's permission we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom. It will serve both as a commemoration of all who have triumphed before, and as a training and a preparation for any whose crown may be still to come.<sup>13</sup>

This text suggests that as early as the second century there was interest in preserving the relics (physical remains) of a holy person and that the day of

his death—his birthday in heaven—was celebrated. In the Middle Ages, the celebration of the feast days of the saints, especially the martyrs, and the veneration of relics were two of the most important forms of popular piety. Relics were much sought after—bought, given as gifts, and even stolen. They were regarded as the means through which innumerable miracles were performed. A place with the relics of a saint was indeed a holy place, and people often traveled long distances to visit such a site. Since Christians believe in the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgment, there was a strong belief in the real presence of a saint where his or her relics were preserved. Thus, people journeyed extraordinary distances to visit tombs such as those of the apostle James in Spain, Peter and Paul in Rome, Mary Magdalen in France, Thomas à Becket in England, and countless others. Even the Crusades to the Holy Land were often described in terms of a pilgrimage to the places where Jesus lived, died, and was raised from the dead. Though there are many reasons for the development of cults of saints, veneration of relics, and pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, we can trace the roots back as far as the middle of the second century.

A saint is one who is in heaven and thus eternally in God's favor. From the first century, Christians who died martyrs' deaths were presumed to be in heaven. There was at this time no formal process of canonization, the process by which one was declared a saint; the fact of martyrdom was sufficient evidence for veneration. With the end of large-scale persecutions in the fourth century, the definition of sainthood was enlarged to include those who professed Christianity and lived an exemplary Christian life. This class of saints is called Confessors. Until the twelfth century, canonization varied from one area to another, and local cults sprang up in virtually all cathedrals and monasteries. Declaring someone a saint usually amounted to little more than placing the saint's relics in a place to be venerated and proclaiming that person's sanctity. From the end of the twelfth century until the present, canonization has been the prerogative of the pope, who collects evidence of sanctity and declares a person to be a saint. Pope John Paul II (r. 1978–2005) formally canonized more saints than all of his predecessors combined.

In the year 250, a new type of persecution began under the emperor Decius. He ordered all citizens of the Empire to sacrifice to the Roman deities under penalty of death. This decree was intended to wipe out Christianity. Fortunately for Christians, this persecution was short-lived because Decius died in 251. However, a similar persecution was ordered by the emperor Valerian in 258, and it lasted until 261. Among the victims of these persecutions were the great theologian Cyprian of Carthage and the deacon Laurence (often spelled Lawrence). His story and those of other martyrs remained popular throughout the Middle Ages, as evidenced by their frequent appearances in sculpture, painting, and stained glass. His life continued to be rewritten and embellished. Here, for example, is a version taken from Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, an enormously popular thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives:



*Martyrdom of Saint Eustace and his family. Fresco, monastery of Pomposa, Italy, fourteenth century. Eustace, a Roman martyr, was put to death by being roasted inside a hollow bronze bull. Above the depiction of the martyrdom, the souls of Eustace and his family are taken to heaven by angels. Like many other stories of Roman martyrs, this one is interesting for its ingenuity. It is adapted from a form of torture used by Greeks in Sicily centuries earlier.*

That same night the saint was haled before Decius. When Hippolytus [a Roman official] wept and cried out that he was a Christian, Laurence said to him: "Hide Christ in the inner man, listen, and when I call, come!" Decius said to Laurence: "Either you will sacrifice to the gods, or you will spend the night being tortured!" Laurence: "My night has no darkness, and all things gleam in the light!" Decius gave his orders: "Let an iron bed be brought, and let this stubborn Laurence rest on it!" The executioners stripped him, laid him out on the iron grill, piled burning coals under it, and pressed heated iron pitchforks upon his body. Laurence said to Valerian [another Roman official]: "Learn, wretched man, that your coals are refreshing to me but will be an eternal punishment to you, because the Lord himself knows that being accused I have not denied him, being put to the question I have confessed Christ, and being roasted I give thanks!" And with a cheerful countenance he said to Decius: "Look, wretch, you have me well done on one side, turn me over and eat!" And giving thanks, he said: "I thank you, O Lord, because I have been worthy to pass through your portals!" And so he breathed his last.<sup>14</sup>

The genre of literature that recites the lives of saints is called "hagiography" (from the Greek *hagios*—"holy"—and *graphein*—"to write"): Hagiography was extraordinarily popular in the Middle Ages. The stories were colorfully

written, with much action and adventure. The heroes and villains were as easy to spot as they are in old white-hat/black-hat cowboy movies. These writings were not attempts to provide biographies of holy people but rather were attempts to edify, instruct in the virtues, and present idealized models for imitation.

The disregard for historical accuracy is obvious in the preceding text where the author has Decius as the emperor, then Valerian, then Decius again. Even the most casual tourist visiting the churches and museums of Europe cannot fail to see evidence of the enormous popularity of the stories of the saints in the Middle Ages. However, interest in the lives was more than merely entertainment and edification for the masses. The greatest writers of the Middle Ages, among them Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure, also wrote or rewrote saints' lives. Of equal importance, these hagiographic conventions were often incorporated even into secular literary genres by writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer.

The growing Christian Church survived the persecutions of Decius and Valerian and was generally left in peace during the next forty years. In fact, some buildings were constructed for Christian worship in the latter half of the third century. However, the emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305), as part of his program to stabilize the Roman Empire, was concerned that the primary loyalty of Christians was not to the state. He began the most serious and wide-ranging persecutions in 303; they continued—with some interruptions—until his successor Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313. Thousands of Christians died in Diocletian's attempt to rid the Empire of Christianity. Out of this persecution, too, came some of the Church's most famous martyrs, including Lucy, Margaret, Vincent, and Sebastian. A contemporary account of one bishop's encounter with the persecutors perhaps gives the best picture of what was involved:

The magistrate Magnilianus said to him: "Are you Felix the bishop?"

"I am," answered Bishop Felix.

"Hand over whatever books or parchments you possess," said the magistrate Magnilianus.

"I have them," answered Bishop Felix, "but I will not give them up."

The magistrate Magnilianus said: "Hand the books over to be burned."

"It would be better for me to be burned," answered Bishop Felix, "rather than the divine Scriptures. For it is better to obey God rather than men."

The magistrate Magnilianus said: "The emperors' orders come before anything you say."

Bishop Felix answered: "God's commands come before those of men."<sup>15</sup>

After Diocletian's retirement in 305, there was civil war among several claimants to the imperial title. Among them was Constantine, son of one of Diocletian's caesars (assistant emperors). He was proclaimed emperor by his

army in York, England, in 306, but he became effective ruler of the western half of the Empire only after defeating his rival Maxentius at the battle of Milvian Bridge on the outskirts of Rome in 312, and did not rule the entire Roman Empire until 323. According to tradition, on the eve of the battle, Constantine had a vision of the cross and heard a voice telling him he would conquer by that sign. He had Christ's monogram marked on his soldiers' shields the next morning. Whatever the historical accuracy of this popular story, Constantine and his co-emperor issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which brought the Empire's persecution of Christians to an end and granted toleration to all religions. In the years following the edict, Constantine came more and more to favor Christianity, although he was not baptized until just before his death in 337. Among his favors to Christianity were the proclamation of Sunday as a holiday, the elimination of branding on the face as punishment because humans are made in the image of God, the grant of exemptions from government service to the clergy, and gifts of buildings and property to the Church.

Although some historians have argued that Constantine's conversion to Christianity was politically motivated and perhaps even a political ploy, there is no good reason to doubt the sincerity of his adherence to Christianity, even though he understood its basic tenets quite differently than many of his fellow Christians did. But if Constantine had hoped that Christianity would cement his empire together, he realized soon after the Edict of Milan that there were serious divisions within the Church. One issue arose directly from the persecution of Diocletian. Unlike Bishop Felix, some clergy submitted Christian books to the Roman authorities to be burned, and even sacrificed to pagan gods in order to escape execution. After the persecution, some of these priests and bishops wanted to take up their offices in the Church again. In North Africa, a dispute broke out because some Christians, later called Donatists, after Donatus, a bishop who replaced one of the "traitors," refused to recognize these "traitors" as priests and bishops. The bishop of Rome, a synod of bishops meeting in France, and Constantine himself (in 316, long before he was baptized) condemned Donatism; the emperor even used his power to attempt to put an end to it. This is the first instance of an emperor using political authority to try to settle an essentially theological controversy among Christians. Despite continued imperial support of the winning position—its supporters always described their views as orthodox, a word meaning right teaching—Donatism persisted in North Africa until the Muslim conquest in the seventh century. In the fifth century, the North African bishop Augustine was a strong opponent of Donatism and wrote powerful treatises supporting the orthodox position.

The Donatist and orthodox views represent two competing beliefs concerning the nature of the Church. The former perceived the Church to be a community of saints, the holy ones of God, from which sinners were to be excluded. On the other hand, the orthodox position was based on a broader

conception of the Church as a mixed body of saints and sinners, all benefiting from the community and the sacraments—the rites through which God's grace is channeled to the community of believers. Furthermore, the orthodox believed that properly ordained clergy administered the sacraments validly even if they themselves were not of good character because ultimately, they argued, it was Christ who administered the sacraments, and he could supply grace by means of the sacraments even through unworthy agents. The victory for the orthodox position was of great importance to the development of the Church, whose membership for much of the medieval period consisted of almost the entire population of Western Europe. However, on occasion, church reformers attacking clerical corruption in the Middle Ages came very close to the Donatist position. Among these are the eleventh-century reformer Cardinal Humbert and the fourteenth-century English theologian John Wyclif. Several popular heresies in the Middle Ages also included Donatist tenets.

The Donatist problem was not, however, the most charged theological problem Constantine had to face. More fundamental was defining the relationship between God the Father and Christ. A third-century theologian, Sabellius, had argued that God the Father and Christ were the same. This position provoked a response, and by the time of Constantine there was widespread agreement that important distinctions needed to be made between God the Father and God the Son. However, accepting that there were indeed distinctions did not mean that there was agreement on the nature of those distinctions. A priest from Alexandria named Arius (d. c. 336) argued that Christ was not coeternal with the Father but rather was the first fruit of creation: "There was a time when he [Christ] was not." In *Paradiso* 13, Dante mentions Sabellius and Arius as representatives of Christian heresy. He suggests that the problem with those who adhered to their views was their inability to see any merits in the other position. The idea that what heretics do is to take part of the truth (in the case of the Sabellians, the unity of God the Father and God the Son; in the case of the Arians, the distinctions between God the Father and God the Son) and confuse it for the whole truth is Dante's working definition of heresy in *Inferno* 10. Arius stressed the differences between God the Father and God the Son and spoke of them as being of different "substances," a philosophical term best rendered in modern English as "essences" or "being." Encouraged at least in part by his ecclesiastical advisers, Constantine summoned a council of bishops, almost entirely from the eastern part of the Empire, which met at Nicaea in Asia Minor in 325. Constantine himself presided over this gathering, now referred to as the First Ecumenical (from the Greek word meaning "the inhabited world") Council even though he was not a baptized Christian at the time. The council condemned Arianism and approved a statement concerning the proper relationship of God the Father to his Son probably suggested by Constantine himself although undoubtedly based on the advice

of trusted bishops. This formula was incorporated into a statement of belief called the Nicene Creed (from the Latin *credere* meaning "to believe"). This creed received significant additions at the Second Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 381, incorporating a greater recognition of the Holy Spirit as part of the Godhead, and one additional change was later added in Latin-speaking Christendom. This final version is worth presenting here in its entirety. The creed is important not only for its condemnation of Arianism and strong proclamation of the Trinity, but also because in the Middle Ages it was incorporated into the Mass and thus was the principal declaration of belief made by the faithful in the West. The creed can be divided into four parts; the first three concern the parts of the Trinity, and the fourth concerns the Church. The section that deals specifically with the challenge of Arianism is in italics:

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
*eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, of one Being [substance] with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.*  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.  
For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.  
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.  
Amen.<sup>16</sup>

Only in the seventh century did Arianism disappear as the Germanic tribes gradually accepted the orthodox (Nicene) position on the relationship of the Father to the Son.

After Constantine, Christians ruled the Roman Empire except for the two-year reign of the emperor Julian the Apostate (r. 361–63). The importance of Constantine's conversion and the beginning of imperial support for Christianity after three centuries of indifference or persecution is hard to overestimate. Among the most immediate changes were the number and kind of converts. Until Constantine, Christians were a small minority but highly dedicated to their faith, as evidenced by the willingness of many to be martyred; when those people became Christians, they obviously did not do so for any material advantage. But with imperial sponsorship of Christianity, countless thousands converted at least in part because Christianity was the religion of the emperor and thus perhaps a good way to get ahead in the Empire. Within a century of Constantine's reign, emperors decreed Christianity to be the only legal religion of the Empire and restricted military and civil service to Christians. Those ready to die for the faith had to learn to deal with and accept many "lukewarm" Christians and consequently to redefine the very nature of the Church.

Since post-Constantinian Christianity was a safe and even favored religion, martyrdom with rare exceptions was no longer possible. How, then, could those deeply devoted Christians show their willingness to lose all for Christ, as the venerated martyrs of the past had done? One reaction was the growth of asceticism (from the Greek word meaning "athletic training"), a vigorous self-denial of worldly pleasures, which was sometimes viewed as a kind of "daily martyrdom" (see chapter 8). The ascetic movement was not confined to men and women living as hermits or in monastic communities in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Even before the victory of Christianity in the fourth century, widows and unmarried women in Rome and other places, often from noble families, made vows of celibacy and poverty, sometimes choosing to live in poor and even squalid conditions.

Another significant change after Constantine occurred in the role of bishops. They began to wear insignia once used only by imperial civil servants, and the emperors treated them as religious counterparts to imperial officials. Even the "throne" or cathedra that came to be used by bishops in their churches was modeled on the seat of high-ranking imperial officials. (The word "cathedral," meaning a church that is the seat of a bishop, derives from this piece of imperial regalia adapted to Christian use.) The bishops of Rome were among those who adopted imperial regalia; in addition, the popes began to use the title and privileges once held by the chief pagan priest of Rome—the *pontifex maximus*. The popes also sponsored large building projects, including the construction of churches on the spots where famous Christians had been martyred. Among these was the Church of Saint Peter, built on the site of Nero's circus in the Vatican. The pope came to live in a palace called the Lateran, which

Constantine bequeathed to the head of the Roman Church. It was next to this palace that the cathedral of Rome, Saints John in Lateran, was built. For most of the Middle Ages, the residence of the pope was the Lateran Palace. Only in the fifteenth century did the popes permanently move to a papal palace across the Tiber in the Vatican.

Throughout the Empire, the Church began to acquire wealth from both imperial and private gifts. The fact that bishops were often the heads of wealthy corporate communities added to the importance of the episcopal office. The control of wealth by the Christian clergy meant that they were important to the economy and governance of the Empire. This is one reason the emperors were so interested in the disputes within Christendom. We have already seen how Constantine became directly involved in what were essentially theological disputes with the Donatist and Arian problems. On the other hand, bishops sometimes sought to exercise their spiritual authority over a Christian emperor to influence essentially political policy. The best example of this involves the emperor Theodosius (d. 395) and the bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose (d. 397). For political reasons Theodosius carried out a massacre in the Greek city of Thessalonica (modern Thessaloniki) in the year 390. When the emperor returned to Milan, which by this time was effectively the capital of the western part of the Empire because of its proximity to the most important military operations, Ambrose chastised him and forbade him to enter the cathedral of Milan until he did public penance for his sin. Theodosius did public penance. On another occasion, a group of zealous Christian monks had burned a synagogue in the eastern part of the Empire; Theodosius ordered the local bishop to restore the synagogue with Church funds. Ambrose's biographer Paulinus recounts what happened upon the emperor's return to Milan:

Moreover, after he [Theodosius] had returned to Milan, he [Ambrose] preached on this very topic in the presence of the people, and the emperor was present in the church at the time. In this sermon he introduced the person of the Lord as speaking to the emperor: "I made you emperor from the lowest; I handed over to you the army of your enemy; I gave to you the supplies which he had prepared for his own army against you; I reduced your enemy into our power; I established one of your sons on the throne of the empire; I caused you to triumph without difficulty—and do you give triumphs to me over my enemies?" And the emperor said to him as he was descending the pulpit: "You spoke against us today, Bishop." But the bishop replied that he had not spoken against him but for him. Then the emperor: "Indeed, I issued a stern order against the bishop concerning the rebuilding of the synagogue. Moreover, the monks must be punished."<sup>18</sup>

Ambrose forced Theodosius to recall the order to rebuild the synagogue by refusing to celebrate Mass until he received Theodosius's promise of obedience in this matter. This same Theodosius was the first emperor to persecute

people who were not orthodox Christians, that is, both heretics such as the Arians and pagans. In 391, he issued a decree that was essentially designed to prohibit paganism:

No person shall pollute himself with sacrificial animals; no person shall slaughter an innocent victim; no person shall approach the shrines, shall wander through the temples, or revere the images formed by mortal labour, lest he become guilty by divine and human laws. Judges shall also be bound by the general rule that if any of them should be devoted to profane rights and should enter a temple for the purpose of worship anywhere, either on a journey or in a city, he shall be immediately compelled to pay fifteen pounds of gold.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in less than a century Christianity had gone from a persecuted minority religion to the official religion of the Roman Empire, the religion required of all public officials.

Throughout the Middle Ages, people were aware that the conversion of Constantine marked a (perhaps the) major change in the history of the Church. Reformers and critics of the Church often lamented that Constantine's gifts to the Church and all the consequences of imperial favor had ultimately led to a corruption of Christian values and Christian ecclesiastical offices. For example, Dante, meeting avaricious popes in hell, moans: "Ah, Constantine, of how much ill was...not your conversion, but that dowry the first rich father took from you" (*Inferno* 19.115-17).<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, here are the words of the important fifteenth-century Bohemian reformer John Hus:

This [spiritual poison] was intimated when Emperor Constantine first enriched the Roman bishop, having given him estates; for a voice was heard from heaven saying: "Today poison has been poured into the Christian communion."<sup>21</sup>

A widely held belief in the Middle Ages was that Constantine actually conferred upon the pope the authority to govern the western half of the Roman Empire; the legend was put in written form in the eighth century, but it was believed to date from the time of Constantine (see chapter 9). This text, known as the Donation of Constantine, was from time to time a major point of dispute between the Holy Roman Emperors and the popes. Elaborate theories of church-state relations relied on the donation. Some writers such as Dante denied the legality and thus the validity of the transfer of imperial power to the pope. However, it was not until the mid-fifteenth century that the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla demonstrated authoritatively that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery.

Another major dispute concerning the nature of Christ arose toward the end of the fourth century and led to the calling of the Third and Fourth Ecumenical Councils, the last councils to be concerned primarily with Christological questions. Although the precise theological positions are complex, the crux of the



*Donation of Constantine. Fresco, San Silvestro Chapel at Santi Quattro Coronati, Rome, c.1250. This painting represents the papal point of view of the relationship between Church and Empire, for we see a humble and subordinate Constantine conferring the symbols of temporal rule upon Pope Sylvester I.*

dispute concerned the relationship of Christ's divinity to his humanity. One position, developed in Alexandria, argued that Christ was fully divine but did not have all human traits; in particular, he did not have the limitations of a human mind. More extreme adherents of this position, the Monophysites (from the Greek word meaning "one nature"), believed that Christ had only one complete nature, that is, a complete divine but only an incomplete human nature. An opposing position came originally from Antioch but was eventually centered in Constantinople when its leading proponent, Nestorius, became bishop of that city. The essence of this position is that Christ had two completely separate natures, and its adherents emphasized the importance of his human nature. The Third Ecumenical Council in 431 at Ephesus condemned this Nestorian position by decreeing that Mary is the Mother of God—Theotokos in Greek (the Nestorians had argued that Mary was the mother of the human nature of Christ but not mother of his divinity). Although the adoption of the term "Theotokos" was for the purpose of clarifying a Christological position, it represents the key moment in the development of Mary's essential role in salvation history. The first church in Rome dedicated to the Virgin, known today as Santa Maria Maggiore, was constructed just after the Council of Ephesus and contains a decorative program that emphasizes the theology

of Mary as Mother of God. The Nestorians faced persecution, and many fled to the Persian Empire. By the seventh century, Nestorian missionaries settled in China, where, especially in the thirteenth century, they were remarkably successful, establishing churches in Beijing, for example. When Marco Polo and some Franciscan missionaries arrived in China in the thirteenth century, they were surprised to find a rather flourishing albeit "heretical" Christian community there.

The Council of Ephesus failed to settle this Christological controversy, since moderates and Monophysites continued to argue the rightness of their beliefs. A council at Ephesus in 449 upheld the Monophysite position over the objections of Pope Leo I. However, a new emperor summoned a council to Chalcedon in 451, now known as the Fourth Ecumenical Council. It denounced the Monophysite position as heretical and defined Christ as having two complete natures, human and divine, each retaining all its properties but indissolubly united at the Incarnation. As mentioned earlier, the Council of Chalcedon also appeared to recognize papal primacy by accepting a letter containing the claim that "Peter had spoken through Leo."

Like the other condemned groups before them, the Monophysites continued to exist, though almost exclusively in the eastern part of the Roman Empire; they were particularly strong in Egypt. Monophysitism was a major divisive element in the Eastern Roman Empire until all the strongholds of the Monophysites were captured by the Muslims in the seventh century (see chapter 5). These conquests occurred in part because there was little loyalty in those places to a persecuting emperor in Constantinople. Several Monophysite churches exist today, including the Coptic church in Egypt, the Ethiopian church, the Jacobite church in Syria, and the Armenian church.

The development of the doctrines and institutions of Christianity, the focus of this chapter, demonstrates the interaction between classical and biblical culture. Taking place as it did primarily in the eastern Mediterranean, this interaction occurred within a Greek cultural and linguistic framework, though somewhat later, a parallel interaction took place in the Latin-speaking West, a development that we will trace in the next chapter by an examination of two of its greatest figures, Jerome and Augustine.