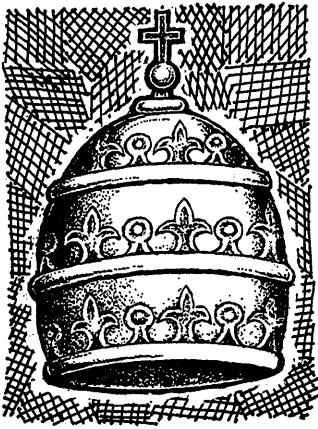


The Early Medieval Church



With the collapse of the Roman Empire by A.D. 500, Roman civilization began a serious decline. For hundreds of years, Rome was a unifying force in the Mediterranean region, bringing security and prosperity to many within the Empire and for those who traded from the outside.

Once the Empire ceased to wield power, however, the West experienced bleak times. Lawlessness was rampant. People lived in constant fear of invaders, robbers, and plunderers. No governmental power existed in the West that provided any sense of security and direction. There was no emperor and no great king to provide protection. Civilization itself seemed to many to be doomed.

Although no great secular or worldly leader emerged in the West following the collapse of Rome, the early Church soon took a position of leadership among Western Europeans. The Church and its leaders became important in maintaining many elements of classical heritage, including literacy. Christianity continued to provide some element of civilization in a world increasingly barbarous and insecure.

Even after Rome ceased to be the center of imperial power, the city continued to be an important Christian capital. Western Europeans looked to Rome for religious direction. The patriarch of Rome, in time, came to consider himself to be the leader of the Western Church.

In the East, the patriarch in Constantinople thought himself to be the head of the Byzantine Church. This resulted in Christianity following several paths during the Early Middle Ages.

Other splits among Christians also occurred. As different Church leaders emphasized various religious ideas, or theologies, splinter groups of Christians were formed. One example was the establishing of the Coptic Orthodox Church in

Egypt around A.D. 450. Its leader was the patriarch of Alexandria. It was the Copts who created monasticism, the practice of setting one's self apart from the secular world as a monk.

In the West, various Roman patriarchs began redefining the scope of their Church office. Innocent I (who served as patriarch from A.D. 402–417) established himself as the only universal leader of the Church. Leo I (440–461) announced the principle of papal supremacy. He also obtained a decree from the Roman emperor recognizing Leo's decisions as having the force of law. Other patriarchs—such as those in Constantinople, Alexandria, and Jerusalem—did not agree, of course.

One justification given by Roman patriarchs for elevating themselves as leaders among the patriarchs was the tradition that the Apostle Peter, one of Jesus' twelve followers, had lived the last years of his life in Rome. The Roman Church came to see Peter as the first Pope, and all other Roman patriarchs to follow him were supreme among Church leaders.

From A.D. 500 to 800, various doctrinal issues further separated Christianity, including a long-standing debate about whether Jesus had been all flesh, all spirit, or a combination of both. Other controversies centered around the use of images, such as paintings and statues, in Christian worship. Some, especially in the Eastern Church, did not believe such images should be used. Such believers were known as iconoclasts, meaning "image-breakers."

Such theological issues plus the dividing of the old Roman Empire into eastern and western halves, caused splits among Christians which remain in place today.

Review and Write

Why did Christianity split into several different Churches during the Early Middle Ages? Cite three reasons.