

## LESSON TWENTY – The Germanic Kingdoms and Benedictine Monasticism

### Introduction

- In 410, Rome had been taken and sacked by Alaric and his Goths.
- The ancient empire, in its Western half, was crumbling. For centuries, Roman legions had been able to hold the Germanic “barbarians” at the Rhine and the Danube.
- In Great Britain, a wall separated the Romanized area from that which was still in control of the barbarians.
- In a series of waves, Germanic hordes crossed the frontiers of the empire, sacked towns and cities and finally settled in areas that had been part of the Roman Empire.
- There they founded their own kingdoms, many of them supposedly subject to the Roman Empire but in truth independent.
- The imperial church, which Constantine had inaugurated, continued existing for another thousand years in the Byzantine Empire. Not so in the West, for it would be a long time before Western Europe could once again experience the political unity and relative peace that it had known under Roman rule.
- It would also take centuries to rebuild much that had been destroyed, not only in terms of roads, buildings and aqueducts, but also in terms of literature, art, and knowledge of the physical world.
- In all of those fields, it was the church that provided continuity with the past. It became the guardian of civilization and of order.
- Centuries later, when the empire was resurrected in the West, this was accomplished through the action of the church, and it was the pope who crowned its emperor.
- Many of the invaders were pagan and therefore the conquered felt the need to teach their faith to their victors.
- Since many of the invaders had previously been converted to Arian Christianity, the issue of Arianism, which had been considered virtually dead for decades, once again came to the foreground in the West.
- Eventually, yielding to the influence of those whom they had conquered, all those Arian invaders would come to accept the Nicene faith.
- Out of all of this, a new civilization would arise, one which was heir to classical Greco-Roman antiquity as well as to Christianity and to Germanic traditions.
- The fall of the Western Roman Empire created a number of independent kingdoms, each of which was of great significance for the subsequent history of the church in its territory. It also gave new functions and power to two institutions that had begun to develop earlier: monasticism and the papacy.

## The Germanic Kingdoms

- The “barbarians” appeared to the Romans as looters with their minds set on destruction, most of them really aspired to settle within the borders of the Roman Empire, and there to enjoy some of the benefits of civilization that they had only known from afar.
- The Vandals, who crossed the Rhine in 407, wandered across France and Spain, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 429, and took Carthage in 439.
- By then they were virtual masters of all the northern coast of Africa from the Straits to the borders of Egypt. They took to the sea and occupied Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia.
- In 455, they sacked the city of Rome and the destruction they wrought was greater than that of the Goths 45 years earlier.
- Their rule in North Africa was disastrous for the church. They were Arians and under their rule repeated persecutions broke out against the orthodox and the Donatists.
- Finally, after almost a century of Vandal rule, the area was conquered by General Belisarius, of the Byzantine Empire.
- The Eastern invaders from Constantinople, whom North Africans called “Greeks,” brought in still another form of Christianity which, although agreeing in doctrine with that of the Western Orthodox, showed marked differences in terms of culture and daily practices.
- The result was that, when North Africa was conquered by the Muslims late in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, they found Christianity badly divided and it eventually disappeared.
- The Visigoths, another Germanic group, defeated the Romans at the Battle of Adrianople in 378, then swept through the Balkans and took Rome in 410.
- By 415, they were in Spain and they ruled that country until they were overthrown by the Muslims early in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.
- It soon became evident that the orthodox descendants of the conquered inhabitants were the guardians of ancient culture, and that their participation was necessary in order to provide the kingdom with a measure of stability.
- This led to the conversion of the Visigoth King Recared to Nicene Orthodoxy, which he solemnly embraced at a great assembly in Toledo in 589.
- The outstanding Christian leader of the entire history of the Visigoth Kingdom was Isidore of Seville.
- He was a scholar who sought to preserve as much as possible of ancient culture. His book *Etymologies* is an encyclopedia that shows the state of knowledge at his time, not only in religious matters, but also in astronomy, medicine, agriculture, and practically every other field of knowledge.
- After the conversion of Recared, the church played the role of legislature for the Visigoth kingdom. In this it provided a measure of order, although in reading the decrees of its councils one cannot but cringe at the injustice and inequalities that reigned.
- The legislation regarding the Jews was similar.
- King Receswinth, killed 700 of his enemies and distributed their wives and children among his friends.

- Finally, under King Roderick the Muslims invaded Spain and put an end to the Visigoth rule.
- During most of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Gaul (which is now present-day France, Belgium, Luxemburg, and parts of Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany and northern Italy) was divided between two invading groups: the Burgundians, who were Arian and the Franks, who were still pagans.
- The Burgundians, however, did not persecute the Nicene-Orthodox, as the Vandals did in North Africa.
- In 516, King Sigismund was converted to Nicene Trinitarian doctrine and soon the rest of the kingdom followed suit.
- The Franks, who France would eventually be named after, were at first an unruly alliance of independent tribes, until a measure of unity was brought by the Merovingian dynasty named after its founder, Meroveus.
- Clovis, Meroveus's grandson and the greatest of the Merovingian line, was married to a Christian Burgundian princess and on the eve of battle promised he would be converted if his wife's God gave him victory. As a result, on Christmas Day, 496, he was baptized, along with a number of his nobles.
- In 534, the Burgundians were conquered by the Franks, and thus the whole region was united.
- The later Merovingians, however, were weak kings, and by the 7<sup>th</sup> century the actual government was in the hands of the chamberlains who were prime ministers. One of these, Charles Martel led the Frankish troops against the Muslims, who had taken Spain, crossed the Pyrenees and threatened the very heart of Europe.
- He defeated them at the battle of Tours in 732. By then he was virtually king, but did not claim the title. It was his son, Pepin the Short, who decided that the time had come to rid himself of the useless King Childeric III.
- With the consent of Pope Zacharias, he forced Childeric to abdicate and become a monk. Pepin was then anointed king by Bishop Boniface, who was acting under papal instructions.
- This was of paramount importance for the subsequent history of Christianity, for Pepin's son, Charlemagne would be the greatest ruler of the early Middle Ages.
- Throughout this process, the role of the church was often compromised. Under powerful kings such as Clovis, ecclesiastical leaders seemed to be content to support and obey the ruler.
- Soon it became customary for kings to decide who should occupy a vacant bishopric.
- Great Britain had never been entirely under Roman control. Emperor Hadrian had built a wall separating the southern portion of the island, which was part of the Roman Empire, from the north, where the Picts and Scots retained their independence.
- When disaster threatened the Roman possession on the continent, the legions were withdrawn from Great Britain and many of the inhabitants left with them. Those who remained were soon conquered by the Angles and the Saxons, who eventually founded the 7 kingdoms of Kent, Sussex, East Anglia, Wessex, Northumbria and Mercia.

- At the same time as some of the various Germanic invasions were taking place, the Irish church was flourishing.
- Since it retained much of its earlier faith and culture, Ireland soon began sending missionaries to other countries, most notably to Scotland.
- The most famous of these missionaries was Columba, who settled on the small island of Iona with twelve companions, probably in 563. The monastery that they founded there became a center of missions to Scotland.
- An important and lasting consequence of the influence of Irish Christianity on the rest of Europe was the spread of the practice of private confession to a priest which had originally developed in Ireland.
- The popular hymn “Be Thou My Vision” is a translation of a Celtic prayer to thwart the evil influence of the Druids.
- For reasons that are not altogether clear, there were a number of differences between this Scotch-Irish Christianity and that which had evolved in the former territories of the Roman Empire.
- Instead of being ruled by bishops, the Scotch-Irish church was under the leadership of the heads of monastic communities.
- The other form of Christianity, the one reflecting and following the customs of the rest of Europe, had always been present in Great Britain among those who kept the traditions of Roman times, but it gained momentum when Christians on the continent became interested in Great Britain. A biographer of Gregory the Great, whom we will cover shortly, records an incident in which young Gregory, who was then living as a monk in Rome, saw some blond young men who were being sold as slaves.

**“What is the nationality of these lads? Gregory asked. They are Angles, he was told. Angels they are in truth, for their faces look like such. Where is their country? In Deiri. De ira (from wrath) they are indeed, for they have been called from wrath to God’s mercy. Who is their king? Aella. Alleluia! In that land must the name of God be praised.”<sup>1</sup>**

- This dialogue probably never took place but it is certain that Gregory was interested in the land of Angles and he may have considered going there as a missionary.
- He became pope in 590 and 9 years later sent a mission to the Angles under the leadership of Augustine (not Augustine of Hippo but a monk from the same monastery to which Gregory belonged).
- When they realized the difficulties that lay ahead, Augustine and his companions considered giving up the enterprise. But Gregory would not hear of it and they were forced to continue.
- They finally arrived in the kingdom of Kent, whose king, Ethelbert, was married to a Christian. At first, they did not have much success but eventually Ethelbert was converted and many of his subjects followed suit. Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury.
- Soon, however, there were conflicts between those who followed this form of Christianity and those who belonged to the Scotch-Irish tradition.

- In Northumbria this conflict became serious, for the king followed the Scotch-Irish tradition and the queen held to the Roman one.
- Since the date for Easter differed, one of them was fasting while the other was feasting. In order to resolve the difficulties, a synod was held at Whitby in 663. The Scotch-Irish stood fast on the traditions they received from the missionary, Columba. The Roman missionaries and their partisans retorted that St. Peter's tradition was superior to Columba's for the apostle had received the keys to the kingdom. On hearing this, the king asked those who defended the Scotch-Irish position:

**“Is it true what your opponents say, that St. Peter has the keys to the Kingdom? Certainly, they answered. Then there is no debate. I shall obey Peter. Otherwise, when I arrive at heaven he might close the doors on me and keep me out.”<sup>2</sup>**

- As a result, the Synod of Whitby decided in favor of the European tradition and against the Scotch-Irish.
- In Italy, the Germanic invasions brought a chaotic situation. Although in theory there were emperors in Rome until 476, these in truth were no more than puppets of various Germanic generals.
- In 476, Odoacer, leader of the Germanic Heruli, deposed the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus and wrote to Zeno, the emperor at Constantinople, telling him that now the empire was reunited.
- At first Zeno was flattered by this, and he even gave Odoacer the title of “patrician.” But soon there were conflicts and the emperor decided to rid himself of the Heruli by inviting the Eastern Germanic Ostrogoths to invade Italy.
- Since the Ostrogoth invaders were Arian, the older population of Italy, which followed the Nicene faith, looked to Constantinople for support.
- This caused the Ostrogoth rulers to suspect that their subjects plotted treason. For this reason, the orthodox were often persecuted, although usually not on religious grounds but rather on charges of conspiracy.
- It was thus that Boethius, the most learned man of the time, was put in jail by King Theodoric. While in prison he wrote his famous work, *On the Consolation of Philosophy* which debates predestination and free will, as well as why evil men prosper while good men are ruined.
- In 524, Boethius was executed along with his father-in-law Symmachus. Two years later Pope John died in prison. Boethius, Symmachus and Pope John were considered martyrs of the Roman church and the tension between the ancient population and Ostrogoths grew.
- Finally, when the Byzantine Empire, under Justinian, had a short period of renewed grandeur, Justinian's general Belisarius invaded Italy and after 20 years of military campaign, he and others put an end to the kingdom of the Ostrogoths.
- But in 568 the Lombards invaded Italy from the north. As Constantinople began losing some of the power it had gained under Justinian, there was the danger that the Lombards would overrun the peninsula.

- Thus, by the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the popes, aware that they could expect little help from Constantinople, began looking to the north for help.
- The alliance between the papacy and the Frankish kingdom that would eventually lead to the crowning of Charlamagne as emperor of the West.
- In summary, from 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe was swept by a series of invasions that brought chaos to the land and destroyed a great deal of the learning of antiquity.
- The invaders brought with them two religious challenges that until then seemed to be matters of the past: paganism and Arianism. Eventually, both pagans and Arians were converted to the faith of those whom they conquered. This was the Nicene faith, also called “orthodox” or “catholic.”
- In the process of that conversion, and also in an effort to preserve the wisdom of ancient times, two institutions played a central role: monasticism and the papacy.

## **Benedictine Monasticism**

- We have already seen that when the church was joined to the empire, and thus became the church of the powerful, there were many who found in monasticism a way to live out the total commitment that had been required in earlier times.
- Although this movement was particularly strong in Egypt and other portions of the Eastern empire, it also found followers in the West.
- This Western Monasticism, however, tended to differ from its Eastern counterpart on three points.
- First, Western Monasticism tended to be more practical. It did not punish the body for the sole purpose of renunciation, but also to train it, as well as the soul, for mission in the world.
- Secondly, Western monasticism did not place the premium on solitude that was typical in the East. From the beginning, Western monasticism sought ways to organize life in community.
- Finally, Western monasticism did not live in constant tension with the hierarchy of the church that was typical of Eastern monasticism.
- The main figure of Western monasticism in its formative years, was Benedict, who was born in the small Italian town of Nursia around 480.
- Benedict was well aware of the tensions between the orthodox and the Arians and the persecution that the orthodox suffered at the hands of the Arians.
- When he was around 20 years old, he resolved to live to become a hermit and went off to live in a cave.
- Eventually his fame grew and disciples gathered around him. When the place proved unsuitable for his purposes, Benedict moved the small community to Monte Cassino, a place so remote that there was still a sacred grove where local inhabitants continued practicing paganism.
- Benedict and his followers cut down the grove, overturned the pagan altar and built a monastic foundation in that very place.

- Shortly afterwards his sister, Scholastica, settled nearby and founded a similar community for women.
- Eventually Benedict's fame was such that the Ostrogoth king went to visit him but the monk had nothing but harsh words for the man he considered to be a tyrant.
- Benedict's greatest significance, however, was in the *Rule* that he gave to his community.
- Rather than extreme asceticism, what the *Rule* seeks is a wise ordering of monastic life, with strict discipline, but without undue harshness.
- There are two elements of the monastic life that are crucial for Benedictine monks. These are stability and obedience. The first means that monks are not free to go from one monastery to another as they please. Each monk must remain for the rest of his life in the monastery he originally joined, unless ordered to go to another place.
- The commitment to stability on the part of Benedictine monks proved one of the sources of the institution's great relevance in a time of chaos.
- Obedience is other element of monastic life that was crucial for Benedictine monks. First, this mean obedience to the *Rule* itself but the abbot is also to be obeyed without delay.
- The word "abbot" means "father" and as such the abbot should behave.
- An errant monk is to be admonished secretly. If after two such admonitions he does not repent, he is to be reprimanded before the community. The next step is to excommunicate.
- If he is still unrepentant, he is to be whipped. If this does not change the errant monk he is to be sorrowfully expelled from the community.
- Even then, if he repents, he is to be received again. This, up to three times is allowed. After the third time the monastery is forever closed to him.
- The *Rule* is not written for venerable saints, such as the heroes of the desert, but for fallible human beings.
- The *Rule* also insists on physical labor, which is to be shared by all. Except in exceptional cases of illness or of unique gifts, all will take turns in every task.
- The ill, elderly and very young received special consideration in the assignment of tasks but those who came from wealthy family receive no special consideration.
- The core of monastic life as Benedict conceived it was prayer. Periods were assigned each day for private prayer, but most of the devotions took place in the chapel. There the monks would gather eight times a day, seven during the daytime and once in the middle of the night for the Psalmist says: "seven times a day I praise thee" (Psalm 119:64) and "at midnight I rise to praise thee" (Psalm 119:62).
- The first gathering for prayer took place in the early hours of dawn, and was followed by seven others.
- These hours, kept by most monastic houses during the Middle Ages, were called *matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline*. Most of the time at these gatherings they would recite the Psalms and read other portions of Scripture.
- The eight hours of prayer came to be called canonical hours and their celebration the Divine Office.
- Although Benedict himself had little to say about study, soon this was one of the main occupations of the Benedictine monks.

- In order to celebrate the Divine Office, books were needed. Monks became adept at copying the Bible and other books and preserved them for future generations. Their houses became teaching centers, particularly for the many children left in their care to be trained as monks. Many of the monks served in hospitals and pharmacies or in hostels where a weary traveler could find shelter.
- Eventually, monasteries also had a profound economic impact, for many were established on marginal lands that were brought into production by the labor of the monks.
- Although the monastic movement had many followers in Western Europe before Benedict's time, it was Benedict's *Rule* that eventually became widespread.
- In 589, the monastery that Benedict founded at Monte Cassino was looted and burned by the Lombards. Most of the monks fled to Rome, taking their *Rule* with them. It was there that Gregory, who would later become pope, came to know them.
- Soon their *Rule* was followed by many in the city of Rome. Augustine, the missionary to England, took the *Rule* with him to the British Isles.
- With the support of the papacy, the Benedictine *Rule* spread throughout the Western church. The many monasteries that followed it, although not organized into a formal order were thus united by common practices and ideals.

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<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo, page 275

<sup>2</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo, page 276