

LESSON TWENTY-FIVE – Charlemagne & The Holy Roman Empire

The Merovingian Dynasty

- When the Franks settled in France in the 5th century, their kings, such as Clovis, the first to embrace Christianity, belonged to the Merovingian dynasty.
- However, the 6th century saw a progressive loss of power by the Merovingian monarchs.
- The problem was the strength of the Frankish nobility, who were soon acting like little independent sovereigns in their huge private domains.
- By 630, the Merovingian kings had practically no authority outside their own royal land.
- The office of mayor became hereditary in the Carolingian family, beginning with Pepin of Landau.
- Pepin and his Carolingian successors launched a campaign to restore prestige and authority of the Merovingian monarchy.
- Part of their strategy for expanding royal authority was the Christianizing of the still pagan tribes in the Netherlands and Germany, such as the Frisians, Hessians and Saxons.
- The Carolingians reasoned that Christian tribes would be less troublesome and rebellious than pagan ones.
- In pursuit of this policy, the Carolingian mayors, especially Charles Martel, gave strong support to a new wave of English missionaries to Germany.

Missionary Efforts to Germany

- Two outstanding figures led the English missionaries. The first was Willibrord, from the northern Angle kingdom of Northumbria.
- Brought up from childhood in the monastery at Ripon, Willibrord spent 12 years as a student in Ireland; then in about 690, he journeyed to the Netherlands at the head of 12 Irish missionaries.
- Willibrord and his companions worked for 50 years in the Netherlands among the southern Frisian tribes; their preaching resulted in large conversions of the Frisians to Christianity.
- The second great English missionary was Winfrid, born near Crediton in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. History knows Winfrid better by his Latin name, Boniface meaning “doer of good.”
- As an adult missionary he first worked alongside Willibrord with the Frisians and in 718 began a new work among the Hessians and Thuringians of central Germany.
- He established many monastic communities, including the famous abbey of Fulda in the central German state of Franconia.
- In all his missionary labors, Boniface received strong support from the papacy, and he in turn upheld papal authority wherever he preached.

- In 723, Pope Gregory II ordained Boniface as a special missionary bishop without a church and in 732 Pope Gregory III raised him to the rank of missionary archbishop.
- Pope Zacharias eventually appointed Boniface Archbishop of Mainz (western-central Germany) in 743, with a huge diocese stretching from Cologne in the north and Strasburg in the south.
- Boniface ended his long and faithful life as a martyr, killed by Frisian pagans in 754.
- As we have seen, both the papacy and Charles Martel in France gave powerful backing to the missionary work of Willibrord and Boniface.
- This religious alliance between the Carolingians and the papacy grew stronger after Charles Martel's death in 741 and the accession of his sons Carloman and Pepin to power.
- Martel had placed his sons in a monastery in their youth, where monks had raised them to have a genuine concern for the welfare of the church.
- Now that they shared the throne of France, they invited Boniface to help them reform the Frankish church.
- Since Boniface acted as the pope's representative, these reforms strengthened the bond between France and the papacy.

The Carolingian Dynasty

- Carloman became a monk after Boniface's reforms were completed, leaving his brother Pepin as sole ruler of the Franks.
- But in theory, Pepin was still only the mayor of the palace, the chief servant of Childeric III, the last of the Merovingian kings.
- Ambition ruled Pepin's heart and he felt that he, the real ruler of France, deserved to wear the royal crown.
- With the support of Pope Zacharias, in 751, Pepin deposed Childeric III, who retired to a monastery.
- Boniface, acting as the pope's representative, crowned Pepin king of France – the first of the great Carolingian royal dynasty.
- This was the first time a pope had claimed that his apostolic authority involved the right to sanction the abdication of one king and his replacement by another.
- Political motives inspired the action of Pope Zacharias in crowning Pepin: Zacharias wanted military allies against the Lombards in Italy.
- A new Lombard king, Aistulf, had come to power in 751 and pursued an aggressive policy of enlarging his territories.
- He expelled the Byzantine governor of the north Italian city of Ravenna, the Western capital of the Byzantine Empire, and swept all Byzantine forces out of northern Italy. Then his armies threatened Rome itself.
- Zacharias's successor as pope, Stephen II, fled into France and threw himself on the mercy of Pepin.
- To make the Frankish-papal alliance even stronger, Stephen himself personally crowned Pepin king of France in a second coronation ceremony in 754.

- In return, Pepin invaded Italy with a Frankish army and forced Aistulf to agree not to attack Rome.
- Two years later in 756, Aistulf broke that agreement and put Rome under siege.
- Pepin gave all the Lombard cities he had captured to Stephen. This action, known as “the donation of Pepin,” created a set of papal territories across western-central and north-eastern Italy known as the “papal-states.”
- Pepin even gave Ravenna to Stephen, rather than restore it to Byzantium.

Pepin’s action bore three enduring fruits:

- 1. It finally snapped the links between the papacy and the Byzantine Empire. The Eastern and Western branches of the church had already been drifting apart; that drift now became more like a speeding torrent. The “only holy catholic and apostolic church” was beginning to break up into two Churches: the Greek speaking Eastern Church, centered on Constantinople, and the Latin speaking Western Church, centered on Rome and the papacy. However, East and West were still in theory united as one Church, and it was not until 1054 that they officially separated.**
 - 2. It sealed the military, political and religious bond between the Franks and the papacy. The Frankish monarchy replaced the Byzantine Empire as the center of Rome’s diplomatic and spiritual world.**
 - 3. It gave the papacy a huge independent state in central and northern Italy. The popes from now on would be secular rulers as much as spiritual leaders. In fact, they often became so absorbed in their secular business that they lost all interest in theology and pastoral work.¹**
- It was also around this time (the middle of the 8th century) that a document called the *Donation of Constantine* appeared.
 - The document was a forgery, exposed by the great Italian scholar Lorenzo Valla in 1440; but for 700 years the popes used this letter to back up their lofty claims.

Charlemagne (Charles the Great)

- When Pepin died in 768, his two sons Charles and Carloman succeeded him as joint rulers of France.
- Carloman died in 771, leaving Charles as sole ruler. He reigned for the next 43 years (771-814) and created the first great Western empire since the fall of Rome in 410. He is called Charles the Great or Charlemagne.
- Charlemagne is one of the truly colossal figures of European history.
- He had a keen, probing mind, a sincere devotion to the Christian faith and Catholic Church, and a burning sense of personal mission from God to unite the Western nations under a Christian empire.
- Charlemagne spent most of his long reign fighting wars. A brave warrior and outstanding general, his armies only ever suffered defeat in battle once.

- His first great campaign was against the Lombard's in Italy. Pope Adrian I (772-795) appealed to Charlemagne to rescue him from the Lombard's.
- Charlemagne invaded Italy, conquered the Lombard Kingdom, deposed Desiderius and made himself king of Lombardy.
- Charlemagne fought the Muslims in Spain and brought the Spanish borderlands as far as Barcelona under his control.
- He also carried out many campaigns on the German frontier, annexing Bavaria and breaking the power of the pagan Avars in the Danube valley (modern Hungary.)
- Charlemagne's longest war was against the pagan Saxons, which required 18 savage campaigns and occupied over 30 years of his reign.
- He eventually crushed Saxon resistance through a policy of forcibly resettling large groups of Saxons in other parts of the Carolingian kingdom, and compelling them to choose between Christian baptism and being put to death.
- This forced conversion of the Saxons aroused protests from some leading Christians including Charlemagne's chief religious advisor, Alcuin of York. Alcuin said:

“Faith is a free act of the will, not a forced act. We must appeal to the conscience, not compel it by violence. You can force people to be baptized, but you cannot force them to believe.”²

- These protests finally succeeded; Charlemagne abolished the death penalty for paganism in 797.
- Many of Charlemagne's church advisors saw the wide extent of his kingdom re-creation of the Roman Empire in the West.
- This led to Charlemagne being recognized as “Emperor of the Romans” in the year 800.
- According to tradition, the man behind this move was Pope Leo III. On Christmas Day 800, while Charlemagne was kneeling at the altar of Saint Peter's Church, Rome, receiving communion, surrounded by the Frankish nobility and Roman clergy, Leo suddenly produced a crown and placed it on Charlemagne's head. Leo's men then shouted out:

“To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-making Emperor of the Romans, long life and victory.”³

- So was born the Holy Roman Empire. Leo's crowning of Charlemagne signified that he was not simply king of the Franks; he was heir of the old Roman emperors, the one in whom the Roman Empire had been reborn, the supreme ruler of the Western world.
- The Byzantine Empire bitterly resented this unilateral claim, since they saw themselves the true heirs of Rome.
- At the same time, Leo's act announced that the new Roman Emperor owed his position to the papacy. Leo was determined to make the Emperor dependent for his imperial crown on God's agent, the pope.

- Charlemagne was pleased with his new status, but unhappy at the way Leo had given it to him. He tried to kill the idea that he owed his authority to the pope by having his own son, Louis, crown himself in Aachen, Charlemagne's capital city, presently in north-west Germany.
- But it was in vain. Leo's act convinced the people of the Middle Ages that the crown of the Holy Roman Emperor was the gift of the pope.

Carolingian Renaissance

- Charlemagne's empire saw a mighty flourishing of Christian culture. This is called the Carolingian Renaissance.
- Paul the Deacon, a Lombard, wrote a collection of sermons for the festivals and saints days of the church, which preachers in the Western church used for the next 1000 years; he also wrote some historical works that are important sources for understanding the Middle Ages.
- Paulinus of Aquileia, also a Lombard, was an outstanding bishop of Aquileia (north-eastern Italy), and a writer of hymns, poems, letters and a number of theological writings against the Adoptionist heresy.
- Theodulph of Orleans, a Gothic Spaniard, was another great bishop, theological writer against Adoptionism and in favor of the filioque clause (the main reason for the Great Schism in 1054), and hymnwriter.
- The greatest of Charlemagne's scholars was the English monk, Alcuin of York. Alcuin was the most influential intellect behind the Carolingian Renaissance.
- Born near the northern city of York, he became head of its cathedral school, before entering Charlemagne's service in 782. For the next 22 years Alcuin was the grand schoolmaster of the Frankish empire.
- The most cultured man in Western Europe, he was a Bible commentator, textual scholar, liturgical reviser, defender of orthodoxy against the Adoptionists, reformers of monasteries, builder of libraries, and learned astronomer.
- Alcuin revised the text of the Latin Bible and established a standard edition of Jerome's Vulgate. Charlemagne took a strong personal interest in the spreading of education, advised chiefly by Alcuin. He ordered bishops and abbots to set up schools for training priests and monks.
- He decreed that every parish should have a school to educate all the male children of the neighborhood.
- He founded his own royal academy in Aachen, presided over by Alcuin, which encouraged the study of logic, philosophy and literature.

Charlemagne and the Church

- Charlemagne saw himself as the spiritual as well as political leader of the Holy Roman Empire.
- He interpreted all public disasters as judgements of God on his empire for its sins, and ordered public fasts.

- For all victories in battle, he ordered public thanksgivings to God. His imperial decrees were more often concerned with religion than politics.
- Charlemagne presided over church councils and actively participated in them. He assumed authority over the bishops within his empire, nominating men of his choosing to vacant bishoprics.
- He tended to treat bishops as a department of Carolingian civil service; many bishops were appointed to secular government positions.
- Charlemagne's religious legislation also affected society at large. For example, he passed strong new laws on the observance of Sunday.
- Furthermore, Charlemagne made the payment of tithes universal and compulsory. Ever since the reign of King Pepin, people had paid tithes to their parish church in many places on a voluntary basis.
- Charlemagne gave it the force of law. Tithes were levied on land, not on persons, and were not paid in cash but in "kind" – corn, wine, hay or livestock. The penalty for refusing to pay tithes to one's parish was excommunication.
- The only great internal doctrinal quarrel in Charlemagne's kingdom was the Adoptionist controversy.
- Two Spanish bishops Elipandus of Toledo (718-802) and Felix of Urgel put forward the view that although Christ, in His divine nature was the eternal Son of God, yet in His human nature He was an adopted son of God, just as believers are.
- Adoptionism spread and caused great controversy within the Frankish empire. It was strongly opposed by Alcuin, Paulinus of Aquileia, and Theodulph of Orleans; they argued that it was the Nestorian heresy to say that there were two sons in Christ, a divine Son and an adopted human son. Adoptionism was condemned at the council of Frankfurt in 794.
- The root of the controversy was the question of whether "sonship" belonged to "nature" or to "person." The Adoptionists said it belonged to nature; and since Christ has two natures (divine and human), He must have two sonship's, an eternal divine sonship and an adopted human sonship.
- By contrast, Alcuin, Paulinus and Theodulph pointed out that Christ's divine sonship belongs to His person, not His nature – it is as a person that He is Son of the Father. Father and Son share one and the same nature, the nature of God; what makes them differ from each other is their distinct personhood, revealed in their divine Fatherhood and Sonship.

Emperor & Pope

- Charlemagne's exalted view of kingship brought him into serious conflict with the papacy. He looked upon himself as *et rex et Sacerdos*, "both king and priest."
- Alcuin and another churchman named Cathwulf saw the king as "vicar of God," standing in God's place.

- Cathwulf wrote that the king is vicar, standing in the place of the whole Trinity in its divine nature; but the bishop is only Christ's vicar – standing in the place of Jesus in His office as Mediator.
- Therefore, the king was higher than any bishop; and that included the supreme bishop, the pope.
- Historians often refer to this vision of the rights and duties of monarchs as the ideal of “sacred kingship.”
- It was not Charlemagne's invention; the Council of Chalcedon in 451 had referred to the Byzantine Emperor Marcian as “priest and king,” and Byzantium's rulers saw themselves in these lofty terms.
- In 790, without consulting with Pope Adrian I, Charlemagne issued the Western Church's response to the “iconoclastic controversy” then raging within Eastern Christianity.
- This was a dispute over the use of images or “icons” of Christ, Mary and the saints in worship. Charlemagne's response came in the so-called Caroline Books, written with the help of his religious advisors, especially Alcuin.
- The Caroline Books took a middle path between Eastern advocates and enemies of icons. On the one hand, Charlemagne and Alcuin rejected the practice of bowing or kneeling before icons, kissing them and burning candles or incense in front of them.
- On the other hand, they accepted that Christians rightly used icons to adorn churches and set forth stories of Christ and the saints. And they accepted that religious honor should be paid to the sign of the cross and relics of the saints.
- The council of Frankfurt, which spoke for the churches of France and Germany, officially sanctioned these views in 794.
- Despite the veto of Pope Leo III, Charlemagne supported the insertion of the *filioque* clause into the Nicene Creed.
- The Creed, as originally put forth by the Council of Constantinople in 381, said that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.”
- From the 6th century onward, the Westerns had begun adding the words “and from the Son” (which in Latin is *filioque*).
- This seems to have originated in Spain; the Spanish council of Toledo added *filioque* to the Creed in 589.
- The crowning moment came with the Carolingian Renaissance, whose theologians decisively committed the Church and Empire of Charlemagne to the *filioque* clause.
- The East protested that the Western Church had no authority to alter one of the ecumenical Creeds, and that in any case this particular alteration was false – the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, but from the Father alone.
- Pope Leo III agreed with the Carolingian position theologically, but opposed the insertion of the *filioque* clause into the Nicene Creed.
- Charlemagne, however, ignored Leo's protests and gave his sanction to the *filioque* clause at the council of Aachen in 809.

- The relationship between Charlemagne and the papacy was therefore uneasy. The creation of the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day 800 paved the way for the fierce conflicts between popes and emperors in the later Middle Ages.
- The papacy stood for the great spiritual principle of freedom and independence of the Church from state control. However, to secure that independence, the popes wanted to place the state under control of the church.
- Pope Leo's crowning of Charlemagne could be used to justify the claim that the papacy had given the Emperor his crown – and it could also be taken away again, if the Emperor did not obey the will of the pope.
- On the other hand, Charlemagne and his successors saw themselves as “sacred kings,” the divinely chosen rulers of a Christian empire, responsible to God for its spiritual as well as secular welfare.
- Therefore, they regarded it as their right and duty to regulate the affairs of the church. The pope was, to them, nothing more than their chief spiritual advisor.
- Supporters of the pope in this conflict were called “papalists;” supporters of the emperor were called “imperialists.”

Developments in Western Worship

- One of the gravest problems affecting the life of the Western Church, after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West in the 5th century, was a widespread decline in the level of education among the clergy.
- The culture, knowledge and literacy of any society's clergy tends to reflect the general standards in society at large; and these standards had fallen seriously in Western Europe in the aftermath of the great Germanic invasions of the 400s.
- The most obvious evidence of this loss of education in Church life was that most clergy now limited themselves to carrying out liturgical and sacramental functions – celebrating holy communion, hearing confessions, baptizing infants, burying the dead.
- They no longer preached sermons. Western Catholics thus became accustomed to a form of worship in which many things were done but hardly anything was explained.
- This was the period in which homilies achieved great prominence in the church's worship. A homily was a sermon written by someone else and read out to the congregation by the priest.
- The practice had sprung up in the 5th century but it was in the 8th and 9th centuries that it became a normal and widespread factor in preaching.
- Up until that point, the Western churches had followed two different liturgies, the Roman and Gallican (French). Charlemagne desired all churches in empire to worship according to the same liturgy.
- Alcuin added some prayers from the Gallican to the Roman liturgy, but his liturgical reform meant that Western Christendom now followed one standard form of worship derived largely from the Western Church.

- The center of Western worship was still the eucharist or communion. Of course, ever since the apostolic fathers, communion had been at the heart of all Christian worship, but the new Western name for communion, “mass,” was accompanied by some important changes in practice.
- Mass probably comes from the closing words of the Western Latin liturgy, *ite, missa, est* – “Go, the congregation is dismissed.”
- In the age of the early church fathers, all Christians had taken part in communion every Sunday; but from the 5th century onwards, lay communion had become less and less frequent in the West, so that only clergy and monks partook on a regular basis.
- By the 6th century, the Western church required lay people to receive communion only three times a year, at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Even this was soon cut down to once a year at Easter.
- Yet parish priests continued to celebrate communion every Sunday, in accordance with early church tradition.
- The only place in the West which resisted this development, and where lay communion continued to be frequent until the later Middle Ages, was in Rome itself. Weekly lay communion continued to be the normal practice in the East.

The reasons behind this huge shift in the way the eucharist was celebrated in the West were twofold:

- 1. First, the tremendous feelings of reverence, dread and fear which had become attached to communion deterred ordinary lay people – especially the new Germanic converts – from taking part. They felt unworthy and afraid to approach the awesome mystery of Christ’s sacrifice, as it was once again made present and effective in the eucharist for the remission of the sins of the living and the dead. These feelings of awe towards communion were deepened still further by the increasing strength of belief that the bread and wine were miraculously and entirely converted into Christ’s very flesh and blood.**
- 2. Second, the clergy themselves, especially the best educated and most spiritually minded, discouraged the majority of laypeople from taking part frequently in communion. Strangely, it was not actually the church’s intention to inhibit lay communion; indeed, priests exhorted their congregations to take part more often. However, they also insisted that in order to take part, people had to be serious, committed Christians who lived in obedience to God’s commands. The most devout of the clergy were only too aware that many of the Germanic peoples had embraced Christianity in a very loose and shallow way, simply following the religious loyalties of their leader. By stressing that only true Christians with genuine repentance and love for God could take part meaningfully in communion, the clergy often set the moral and spiritual**

standard so high that it deterred even the most sincere believers from taking part.⁴

- Another important development in Western worship which took place in the 8th century was the distinction between “high mass” and “low mass.”
- High mass was a simplification of the traditional communion liturgy; it is sometimes called “sung mass” because it included singing (in contrast to low mass).
- All clergy and laity of a congregation participated in the liturgical part of high mass, and most parish churches celebrated it every Sunday.
- In low mass, only the priest performed; there was no singing and the priest spoke the liturgy in a very quiet voice. The laity did not take part in any way; they merely watched and carried out their own private devotions.

Gottschalk & The Predestination Controversy

- The central and tragic figure in this controversy was Gottschalk of Orbais (805-869), the son of a Saxon nobleman. His parents placed him in the abbey of Fulda when he was a child. He later tried to obtain release from his monastic vows, but the abbot of Fulda, Rabanus Maurus, forced Gottschalk to remain a monk.
- Although Rabanus would not release Gottschalk from his vows, he did allow his reluctant monk to move from Fulda to the monastery of Orbais in north-eastern France.
- In France, Gottschalk received ordination to the priesthood. An ardent disciple of Augustine of Hippo and Fulgentius of Ruspe, he began teaching their doctrines of sins, grace and predestination with passionate enthusiasm in Orbais.
- Gottschalk’s zeal for Augustinianism brought him into conflict with Rabanus, who wrote against him; Gottschalk responded by accusing Rabanus of Semi-Pelagianism.
- Gottschalk defended his views at the council of Mainz in 848, where he went several degrees beyond Augustine’s theology by arguing that Christ died only for the elect (the doctrine of limited atonement), and that the precise number of the non-elect is specified by an eternal decree of God, a predestination to death, which runs parallel to the decree of election to life (the doctrine of reprobation).
- Augustine never explicitly taught these two ideas. The council condemned Gottschalk and delivered him over to Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims, in whose diocese Orbais was situated.
- Hincmar, who combined a Semi-Pelagian tendency in theology with a personal tendency to behave like a thug, deposed Gottschalk from the priesthood, had him flogged within an inch of his life, ordered his books be burned and imprisoned him in the monastery of Hautvilliers, near Rheims.
- Gottschalk spent the rest of his life there, continuing to dispute with Hincmar to the bitter end.
- Hincmar’s harsh treatment of Gottschalk outraged many churchmen. Great Catholic scholars leapt to the defense of Gottschalk and his theology.

- The church of Lyons produced some of the greatest medieval works in defense of Augustinian theology.
- The councils of Valence in 855 and Langres in 859 sanctioned a strong Augustinianism.
- However, the councils of Quiercy in 853 and Savonnières in 859 upheld the more Semi-Pelagian theology of Rabanus and Hincmar.
- The two parties reached a compromise at the council of Toucy in 860, over which the West Frankish king Charles the Bald presided.
- Hincmar, the most powerful bishop in France, took the leadership part in the council and the compromise agreement favored his views, that God wills the salvation of all human beings and that Christ died for all.
- Despite the council of Toucy, the issues raised by Gottschalk were never really resolved. Approval for Hincmar's Semi-Pelagian views only ever came from local Frankish councils, never from an ecumenical Council, and a full-bodied Augustinianism continued to flourish within Western Christendom.

¹ 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume Two, The Middle Ages, Needham Nick, pages 55-56

² 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume Two, The Middle Ages, Needham Nick, page 58

³ 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume Two, The Middle Ages, Needham Nick, page 58

⁴ 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume Two, The Middle Ages, Needham Nick, page 69