

# Christianity in the Middle Ages

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While Christianity was spreading in the Greco-Roman world, that world was itself undergoing revolutionary changes. The reasons for the decline and eventual collapse of the Roman Empire were numerous, and no single explanation is adequate. Internally, the empire never solved the problem of a stable, peaceful succession of competent leaders. Emperors usually appointed their successors, but some proved incompetent, emotionally imbalanced, or evil. From the beginning, the rule of force was established as superior to the rule of law, allowing many generals to contest the succession, often successfully; the result was a series of devastating civil wars and sometimes frequent changes in leadership. The simple technology of the day placed limitations on the empire's growth; for example, a peaceful society allowed for increased trade and greater prosperity, which produced larger cities, but the unsanitary conditions of the larger cities also stimulated disease, which the improved transportation systems spread empire-wide. Thus the empire suffered from several serious plagues in the first and second centuries.

The western empire collapsed under the pressure of the migratory tribes. Rome was sacked in 410 and 455 and was besieged three times in the sixth century; its population, nearly a million in the first and second centuries, declined to less than fifty thousand by the end of the sixth century. By the eleventh century it was only thirty thousand. In Britain urban life was completely swept away by the tribes of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who were entering, conquering, and settling. Latin became extinct as a spoken language in Britain, and the Celtic peoples were assimilated or driven into the hills of Wales and Cornwall. Gaul was overrun by various tribes, among them the Franks, for whom the country was renamed; urban life there collapsed as well. Spain and Portugal were overrun by the Goths.

One result of the invasions was a steady shrinkage of Christendom. In the north, Britain was completely lost, any gains in Germany were eliminated, and even in France and Spain Christianity was imperiled. The invasion of the Bulgars and southern Slavs swept away Christianity in parts of the Balkans; then the Magyars occupied Hungary, destroying Christianity there. But the worst blow to Christendom was undoubtedly the spread of Islam, which ultimately eliminated or drastically weakened Christianity in half of the former Roman Empire (the eastern and southern half). It would be hundreds of years before these losses were reversed, primarily through conversion of the Germanic and Slavic peoples north of the former Roman Empire.

In the rising tide of chaos one institution stood out as a source of hope: the church. Not only did the church come to represent the City of God and the hope for humanity's future, but it was blessed by many able leaders who were able to use the church's size and prestige to preserve what civilization remained. Bishops often were able to persuade barbarian chiefs not to sack their cities; in Rome, the Popes largely ran the city, organizing the collection and distribution of food and other essentials. Gregory the Great (c. 540 - 604) was the most distinguished example of leadership. Son of a Roman senator, in 590 he was forced to abandon a monastic life of prayer when he was unanimously elected Pope. He used the church's estates in southern Italy and Sicily to grow food for Rome's poor. He appointed governors to run other Italian cities. He negotiated a peace treaty with the Lombards, a German tribe then occupying northern Italy. He sent missionaries to England to reestablish Christianity there (the German invasion had destroyed it two centuries earlier). He also helped bring about the conversion of many barbarian tribes to Catholicism from Arianism, a rival form of Christianity. His efforts to missionize pagan areas of western Europe strengthened the claim of the bishop of Rome to primacy over the church in western Europe. This greatly fostered the development of the papacy.

Monasteries also developed as the focal points of civilization. Monasticism as a tendency in Christianity can be traced back to the first century (Mt ). First Timothy (a letter attributed to Paul, though written in the early second century) speak of an orders of widows, presumably the forerunner of nuns. In the late third century, Antony of Egypt (251-356) began to organize the Christian hermits living in the desert into a monastic community. Possibly gnosticism influenced the strong monastic tendency that developed in Egypt; indeed, the so called "gnostic gospels" found in southern Egypt in the 1940s are thought to represent the gnostic library of a ruined monastery nearby, which were probably buried as a result of an order that monasteries destroy all heretical works.

Jerome was one of the earlier monks in the western Roman empire, having been a hermit in the Syrian desert for five years. Augustine established a monastery in North Africa. As Christianity went from a religion of a small minority to the dominant form of religion in the Roman Empire the dedication of the mass of its followers declined somewhat, and monasticism provided a new outlet for zealous Christians to pursue a religious life different from their contemporaries. Thus its influence steadily grew in the fourth and fifth centuries.

The collapse of the western empire also made monastic life increasing attractive. It provided some measure of safety, since few monasteries were destroyed. Because monasteries were usually self-sufficient, they had a reliable food supply, and the brothers or sisters took care of their own when they were sick or old. Celibacy meant that family responsibilities would not be a distraction. Learning was prized, so monks had the time to learn Latin and sometimes even Greek, to read and study--not just the Bible, but the old philosophical and literary classics--and to write. Under the circumstances of the times, what Mediterranean and Christian civilization that survived was mostly to be found in the monasteries. The monasteries also initiated educational programs to teach Christianity to the masses, which had been partially de-Christianized by the empire's collapse. The rural areas of the western Empire had never been completely Christianized anyway; the monks completed the job.

Ironically, one of the great powerhouses of monasticism was Ireland. Because of its isolation Ireland never suffered barbarian invasions, until the Vikings in the tenth century. Christianity arrived in Ireland about 600 under Saint Patrick and quickly conquered the island. Irish Christianity was initially monastic; monks went into virgin territory, established a new monastery, and from it converted the population. Initially Ireland had no dioceses and parishes, just monasteries; the local abbot, not the local bishop, was powerful. Working with Rome, in the eighth and ninth centuries hundreds, if not thousands, of Irish monks spread out over Gaul, Germany, even northern Italy, founding monasteries. Usually thirteen monks traveled together to found a new monastery, in imitation of Christ and his twelve disciples.

A significant figure in the development of monasticism in Europe was Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547), an Italian monk who acquired a reputation as a holy man and who consequently attracted many disciples. Benedict organized many monasteries, and the experience he acquired culminated in the rule of Saint Benedict, a document that sets the basic principles of monastic life. Such a life is dominated by unconditional obedience to God's will and to the exercise of humility; it views the abbot as central in a monk's spiritual development; and it advocates a daily life that balances worship, prayer, reading of scripture, and useful work. Benedict's rule was a synthesis of existing monastic practices with Benedict's own insights. Upon it a monastic order--the Benedictines--was founded. It was the first organized monastic order in the Catholic church.