

## CHAPTER 8 : THE FIFTH CENTURY CHURCH

At the beginning of the fifth century lived one of the most influential theologians in Christian church history: Augustine. He is a decisive figure in church history, anticipating both the church of the Middle Ages as well as the church of the Reformation. He had been converted to the Christian faith by Ambrose, whose biography we considered in the previous chapter. And he was raised in Roman north Africa by a pagan father and a Christian mother, and he was educated in Carthage.

While a student at Carthage, Augustine was particularly attracted by the theater, the spectacles at which were of unusual magnificence. To his enthusiastic and sensuous spirit they were irresistible, and the extent to which he seems to have yielded to the fascination is sufficient proof of his active alienation from Christianity at this period. The Christian church at this time, and since the Apostolic era, had "abhorred the pagan theater. The idolatrous rites, the lascivious attitudes, the gladiatorial shows, which were its inseparable accompaniments, were equally opposed to the dogmatic monotheism, to the piety, and to the mercy of the gospel." Habitual absence from the theater was at that time regarded as one of the most significant signs of a man having become a Christian. No one was more emphatic on this point afterwards than Augustine himself, and as the result of his own experience, he seems to have doubted, apart from the gross immoralities of the pagan stage, whether the indulgence in fictitious joys and woes is a warrantable excitement (*Confess.*, iii. 2).

Augustine at this time engaged restlessly in philosophical studies, and passed from one phase of thought to another, unable to find satisfaction in any. Manichaeism first enthralled him. Its doctrine of two principles, one of good and one of evil, seemed to answer to the wild confusion of his own heart, and the conflict of higher and lower impulses which raged within him. It seemed to solve the mysteries which perplexed him in his own experience and in the world. He became a member of the sect, and entered into the class of *auditors*.

But the Manichaean system lost its attraction for him; he gradually became disgusted, and abandoned it. But before this he had left Carthage, shocked with the license of the students, and had betaken himself for a time to Rome in the pursuit of his profession. There he also soon became dissatisfied, and accepted an invitation to proceed to Milan, where the people were in search of a teacher of rhetoric. Augustine was there employed as a professor of rhetoric by 383.

Augustine was converted to Christianity by the preaching and example of Ambrose of Milan. He was baptized at Easter in 387, and returned to north Africa and created a monastic foundation at Tagaste for himself and a group of friends. In 391 he was ordained a priest in Hippo. He became a famous preacher (more than 350 preserved sermons are believed to be authentic). In 396 he was made coadjutor bishop of Hippo (assistant with the right of succession on the death of the current bishop), and remained as bishop in Hippo until his death in 430. He left his monastery, but continued to lead a monastic life in the episcopal residence.

Augustine was a prolific author in several genres - theological treatises, sermons, scripture commentaries, and autobiography. His *Confessions* is usually accorded the position of the first autobiography; Augustine moves from his conception to his current (at about the age of fifty) relationship with God, and ends with a long excursus on the book of Genesis in which he demonstrates how to interpret scripture. The psychological awareness and self-revelation of the work still impresses readers. His great work, the most elaborate, and in some respects the most significant, that came from his pen, is *The City of God*. It is designed as a great apologetic treatise in vindication of Christianity and the Christian church,--the latter conceived as rising in the form of a new civic order on the crumbling ruins of the Roman empire,--but it is also, perhaps, the earliest contribution to the philosophy of history, as it is a repertory throughout of his cherished theological opinions.

He was noted for combatting the Manichaeism, the Donatist, and the Pelagian heresies. The Donatist schism sprang out of the Diocletian persecutions in the beginning of the fourth century. A party in the Church of Carthage, fired with fanatical zeal on behalf of those who had distinguished themselves by resistance to the imperial mandates and courted martyrdom, resented deeply the appointment of a bishop of moderate opinions, whose consecration had been performed, they alleged, by a *traditor*. They set up, in consequence, a bishop of their own, of the name of Majorinus, succeeded in 315 by Donatus. The party made great pretensions to purity of discipline, and rapidly rose in popular favor. Augustine was strongly moved by the lawlessness of the party, and launched forth a series of writings against them, the most important of which survive, though some are lost. Amongst these are *Seven Books on Baptism*, and a lengthened answer, in three books, to Petilian, bishop of Cirta, who was the most eminent theologian amongst the Donatist divines. At a somewhat later period, about 417, he wrote a treatise concerning the correction of the Donatists (*De Correctione Donatistarum*), "for the sake of those," he says in his *Retractations*, ii. c. 48, "who were not willing that the Donatists should be subjected to the correction of the imperial laws." In these writings, while vigorously maintaining the validity of the Catholic Church as it then stood in the Roman world, and the necessity for moderation in the exercise of church discipline, Augustine yet maintained the duty of the civil magistrate to enforce both tables of the Ten Commandments, and thus to suppress heresies and schisms like that of the Donatists.

When the expression Augustinianism is used, it points especially to the opinions of Augustine which were evoked in the Pelagian controversy, to which he devoted the most mature and powerful period of his life. His opponents in this controversy were Pelagius and some of his disciples. Pelagius was a British monk. Travelling to Rome about the beginning of the 5th century, he took up his abode for a time there, and soon made himself conspicuous by his activity and opinions. One of his pupils outlined the Pelagian position thus:--(1.) That Adam's sin was purely personal, and affected none but himself; (2.) That each man, consequently, is born with powers as incorrupt as those of Adam, and only falls into sin under the force of temptation and evil example; (3.) That children who die in infancy, being untainted by sin, are saved without baptism.

These Pelagian views were in conflict with Augustine's theology as well as that of the catholic church at the time. Augustine undertook their refutation, first of all, in three books on *Forgiveness of Sins and Baptism*, in which he vindicated the necessity of the baptism of infants because of original sin and the grace of God by which we are justified (*Retract.*, ii. c. 23). In the same year he composed a further treatise on *The Spirit and the Letter*. Three years later he composed two further treatises on Nature and Grace, and the relation of the *Human to the Divine Righteousness*. The controversy was continued during many years in no fewer than fifteen treatises. Upon no subject did Augustine bestow more of his intellectual strength, and in relation to no other have his views so deeply and permanently affected the course of Christian thought. While Augustine's teachings sadly gave currency to baptismal regeneration, they yet firmly uphold what we now call the reformed Protestant doctrines of the total depravity of man, unconditional election, and efficacious grace.

Many other doctrinal and philosophical issues were addressed by Augustine, that have had a lasting legacy in theological discussion. This includes his treatment on the relation between faith and reason, in which he rightly recognizes faith as a pre-condition of knowledge with these words: "Believe in order that you may understand." *On the Gospel of John, 29.6; Sermon CXVII.I* It also includes his treatment on the Trinity and his treatment on ecclesiology.

Augustine died in 430 during the siege of Hippo by the Vandals. He is said to have encouraged its citizens to resist the attacks, primarily on the grounds that the Vandals adhered to Arian Christianity, which Augustine rightly regarded as heretical.

The Vandals were one of many northern European tribes which were conquering large segments of the western Roman empire in this perilous era. The Romans for the last two hundred years had been growing more and more selfish and easy in their habits. Their corrupted form of Christianity did not engender true piety. So instead of fighting their own battles, they had called in strangers to fight for them, till these strangers became too strong for them. The nations to whom these hired soldiers belonged, were the forefathers of most of the present people of Europe. They were called Teutons altogether, and lived in the northern parts of Europe. They were tall, fair, large people, very brave and spirited, with much honor and truth, though apt to be savage and violent; and they showed more respect to their women than any of the heathens did. They had many gods, of whom Odin, who left his name to the fourth day of the week, was the chief and father. Freya, the Earth, was his wife, and Thor was Thunder. There was a story of Baldur, a good and perfect one, who died by the craft of Lok the Destroyer, and yet still lived. This seemed like a copy of the truth; and so did the story of Lok himself, the power of evil, with a serpent on his brow, who lay chained, and yet could walk forth over the earth, and whose pale daughter, Hela, was the gaoler of the unworthy dead. They thought the brave who died in battle had the happiest lot their rude fancies could devise; they lived in the Hall of Odin, hunting all day, feasting all night, and drinking mead from the skulls of their conquered enemies.

The tribe called Goths, who lived near the Romans, and who took their pay and entered their armies, learnt the Christian faith readily; but unfortunately, it was through Arians that they received it, and those farther off continued to worship Odin.

The great Theodosius left his Roman empire parted between his two sons, Arcadius in the east, Honorius in the west. Both were young, weak, and foolish. They quarrelled with the great Gothic chief, Alaric, who began to overrun their dominions, and at last threatened Rome so much, that Honorius was forced to call home all his soldiers to protect himself. The first province thus left bare of troops, was Britain, which remained a prey to the savage Scots, and then was conquered by the Saxons and Angles, two of the heathen tribes of Teutons, who seemed for a time quite to have put out the light of Christianity in their part of the island.

The Britons in the Welsh hills, however, still continued a free and Christian people; and Patrick, a noble young Roman, who had once been made captive by the wild Irish, and set to feed their sheep, no sooner grew up than he went back to preach the gospel to them, and deliver them from a worse bondage than they had made him suffer. So many did he convert, and such zealous Christians were they, that Ireland used to be called the Isle of Saints.

In the meantime Alaric marched against Rome. Once he was beaten back, and Honorius celebrated the victory by the last Roman triumph ever held, and after it, by the last of the shows of fighting slaves. A monk sprung into the amphitheater while it was going on, and, in the name of Christ, forbade the death of a gladiator who had been wounded, and was to have been killed. The people, in a rage, stoned the good man; but they were so much ashamed, that these shocking entertainments were given up for ever. Rome never won another victory.

Alaric came on again; and though he honored the noble city so much, that he could not bear to let loose his wild troops on it, the false dealing of Honorius at last made him so angry, that he led his Goths into the city; but he was very merciful, he ordered that no one should be killed, and no church injured nor plundered; and he led his army out again at the end of six days. Honorius had fled to Ravenna, and though a few more weak and foolish men called themselves Emperors of the West, the very title soon passed away, and the chief part of Italy was held by the Goths and other Teuton tribes; but they seldom came to Rome, where the chief power gradually fell into the hands of the Pope.

Gaul was conquered by another Teutonic (i.e., Germanic) race called the Franks, who were very fierce heathen at first, but were afterwards converted. Their great leader, Clovis, married a Teutonic lady named Clotilda, a Catholic Christian. She was very anxious to lead him to her Catholic Christianity; and at last, in a great battle, he called out in prayer to Clotilda's God; and when the victory was given to him, he took it as a sign from Heaven, and on coming home was baptized, and built the Church of Notre Dame at Paris, which is said to be just as long as the distance to which King Clovis could pitch an axe.

Spain was conquered by a set of Arian Goths; but a Frank princess, great grandchild to Clotilda, brought her husband, the young prince, to catholic thinking; and though they were persecuted, even to the death, their influence told upon the rest of the family; and the younger brother, who came to the throne afterwards, brought all Spain to be catholic.

Even as the old empire based in Rome was falling, and the Goths were conquering the West, the bishop of Rome was consolidating his power over the catholic church in the West. Under Pope Leo the Great (440 – 461) a forward step was taken. An imperial manifesto in 445 AD of Emperor Valentinian III recognized the Bishop of Rome as supreme over the Western Church. Consequently, the Church of Rome assumed the form and exercised the sway of an ecclesiastical principality, while her head affected the authority and pomp of a spiritual sovereign.

The ascent of the bishop of Rome to the supremacy was silently yet powerfully aided by that mysterious and subtle influence which appeared to be indigenous to the soil on which his chair was placed. In an age when the rank of the city determined the rank of its pastor, it was natural that the Bishop of Rome should hold something of that pre-eminence among the clergy which Rome held among cities. Gradually the reverence and awe with which men had regarded the old mistress of the world, began to gather round the person and the chair of her bishop. It was an age of factions and strife, and the eyes of the contending parties naturally turned to the pastor of the Tiber. They craved his advice, or they submitted their differences to his judgment. These applications the Roman Bishop was careful to register as acknowledgments of his superiority, and on fitting occasions he was not forgetful to make them the basis of new and higher claims. The Latin race, moreover, retained the practical habits for which it had so long been renowned; and while the Easterns, giving way to their speculative genius, were expending their energies in controversy, the Western Church was steadily pursuing her onward path, and skillfully availing herself of everything that could tend to enhance her influence and extend her jurisdiction.

The removal of the seat of empire from Rome to the splendid city on the Bosphorus, Constantinople, which the emperor had built with becoming magnificence for his residence, also tended to enhance the power of the Papal chair. It removed from the side of the Pope a functionary by whom he was eclipsed, and left him the first person in the old capital of the world. The emperor had departed, but the prestige of the old city – the fruit of countless victories, and of ages of dominion – had not departed. The contest which had been going on for some time among the five great patriarchates – Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome – the question at issue being the same as that which provoked the contention among the disciples of old, "which was the greatest," was now restricted to the last two. The city on the Bosphorus was the seat of government, and the abode of the emperor; this gave her patriarch Powerful claims. But the city on the banks of the Tiber wielded a mysterious and potent charm over the imagination, as the heir of her who had been the possessor of all the power, of all the glory, and of all the dominion of the past; and this vast prestige enabled her patriarch to carry the day. As Rome was the one city in the earth, so her bishop was the one bishop in the Church.

Even the term “pope” gradually began to take on a new meaning in the church, especially in the church in the West. The word *pope* (post-classical Latin *papa*, father) had applied to presbyters (also called priests) in general. Even in the 4th and 5th centuries the term still was frequently used of any bishop, but in the catholic church it gradually came to be reserved to the bishop of Rome, becoming his official title. In the East, on the other hand, the term was used to designate either a patriarch or priests in general. In the Greek Church and in Russia all the priests are still called *pappas*, which is also translated “pope”.

So henceforth we shall capitalize the “C” in “catholic” when we mean to designate this organization under the control of the bishop of Rome. While the term “catholic” had meant adhering to orthodox Trinitarian Christianity, over time the term Catholic came to generally mean recognizing the authority of the bishop of Rome as supreme over the church. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church adhered to the Trinitarian doctrine, in contrast to Arianism, but it held to many false doctrines as well.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.