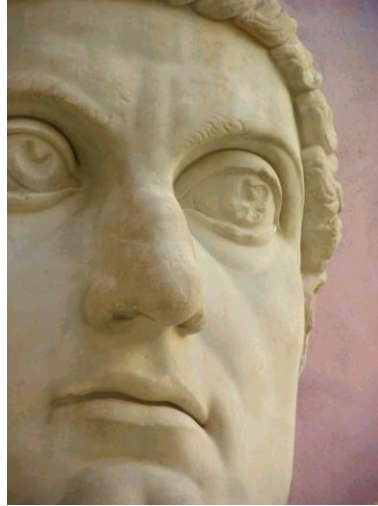


The Story of Christ's Church

The Story of Christ's Church – Part 2

325 – 600 AD: The Church wins acceptance – at a price!



Emperor Constantine

306 – 337 AD

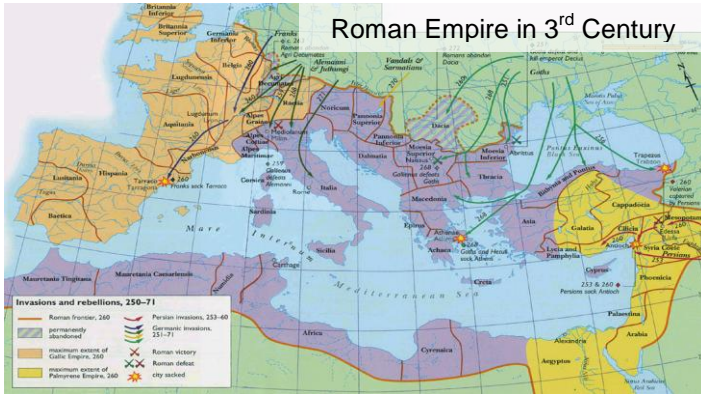
Aim: to show how the Church responds to the new and unexpected atmosphere of freedom, how it struggles to express the truth about Christ, its Creedal Orthodoxy, in an atmosphere of confusion and controversy, and how it keeps alive the passion of following Christ in an atmosphere of materialism.



Milan Cathedral

Introduction: several years ago I visited Milan cathedral; its huge iron doors tell the story of Constantine's conversion in 312 and unbanning of the Church in 313 with Edict of Milan. The sudden ending of 250 years of hostility surprised Christians throughout Roman Empire from Cordoba to Damascus, from Rome to the Middle East, from Athens to Alexandria.

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For the next 300 years Church continues to expand into every corner of the Roman Empire; the rise of monastic movement in the east, with St Anthony of Egypt and the Desert Fathers, seeks to preserve the ideal of giving all for Christ; from monasteries, missionaries went out to evangelise new tribes flooding into the Empire:

- ✚ Ulfilas' mission to the Goths,
- ✚ Martin of Tours' mission to N. France,
- ✚ Patrick's mission to Ireland, and
- ✚ from Ireland the evangelisation of Scotland and N. England).

But the new atmosphere of freedom brought many unforeseen problems and challenges.

1. Opportunity and danger: The relationship between the Church and the Emperor



The Roman army in Britain backs Constantine for Emperor and he marches on Rome; in 312AD, on eve of battle against Maxentius, his rival in Italy, he reports that Christ appeared to him in a dream and told him to print first two letters of his name (XP) on the shields of his soldiers; the next day he saw a cross superimposed on the sun and the words underneath: "in hoc signo vinces" ("in this sign you will be the victor"). He defeated his rival at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, near Rome, and was hailed as the saviour of the Roman people. Seeing his victory as the gift of Christ and becomes a Christian. In 313AD, he lifted the ban against Christianity with Edict of Milan, and gave her a privileged position.

As prophesied in Revelation, it was an amazing victory for the Church (only 10% of pop being Christian); despised for 250 years she was now respected. "One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor" became the motto of the emperor and of large sections of the Church.

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Some aspects of this new relationship were positive:

- 1. Church becomes more visible:** instead of worshipping secretly (in the catacombs) she could now buy property and build churches for public worship; discrimination in work-place declines.
- 2. Church attendance increases:** going to church becomes popular as newcomers lose their fear of going into them; many learn of Christ, experience worship and come to faith.
- 3. Jerusalem accessible again as a place of pilgrimage for Christians:** Constantine urges archaeologists to find Christ's tomb in Jerusalem and builds over it "Church of Holy Sepulchre" as a witness to resurrection.
- 4. Constantinople (after Constantine; now Istanbul) is developed as the "new eastern Rome":** it becomes centre of eastern Christianity and Constantine is viewed as a great Christian saint.

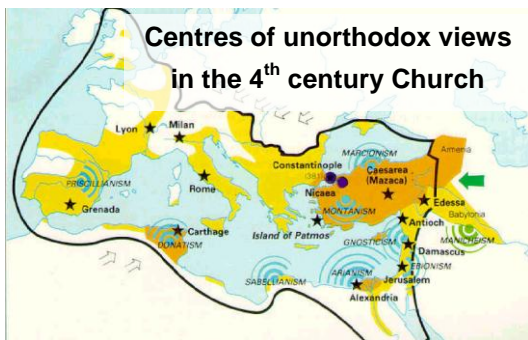
Some aspects of this new relationship were negative:

- 1. Being a Christian becomes easy:** Emperor sets trend, many followed the fashion; the cross with its demand for courage fades and Church, respected for its deep convictions, is flooded with people for whom it means very little and becomes a respected social custom.
- 2. The State views the Church as its chaplain:** Christ is seen as uncritically backing the Roman Empire; Church leaders are invited to big State occasions; they bless her decisions and assure her that in her many wars "God is on our side!". The Roman authorities valued this 'wedding': the borders of the Empire were under threat; her economy exhausted because of the huge defence budget and shrinking markets. The Church loses its prophetic edge and becomes politically correct, turning a blind eye to social injustices. She becomes a chaplain to the State.
- 3. Christian intolerance:** 80 years after the end of the persecution of the Church and the declaring of Christianity to be legal, in 392AD the emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be **the only legal religion** within the Roman Empire. Church and State turn their attention to persecuting other faiths; in 416 all non-Christian soldiers were purged from the Roman Army. Force in difference forms is used to 'persuade' non-Christians to 'believe' or else!

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When the Church allies itself with State it can lose its spiritual independence, its moral courage in challenging social evils, its desire to promote values of Christ's Kingdom: justice, equality, harmony, compassion. There should also be no 'incentives' for following Christ except his message. Church should be a "forum" for discussing, commending, criticizing and turning the big concerns of our day into programmes that build up community-harmony, foster social justice, work for equality, and seek to give disadvantaged people greater opportunity. For Christians Christ is always Number One, He is Lord. Challenging our culture with the values of the Gospel is an essential ingredient of God's grace.

2. The challenge from false teaching and the emergence of the great Creeds



When people from many different religious and cultural backgrounds flow into the Church they usually bring with them beliefs and attitudes from the world they have grown up in. Tensions and conflicts often erupt. One such major issue that the Church had to face within itself was **'the Arian Controversy'**, which centred on who Jesus really was.



Its spokesman was Arius, an eloquent and respected priest from Alexandria in Egypt. In 319 he clashed his bishop about the divinity of Christ. Arius claimed that Jesus was not God, as the Church confessed, but rather the finest human being that ever lived; he was like us, but without sin, full of love, and open to God's Spirit. He was what we are called to be. But He was not eternal, nor of the same essential being as God himself; rather, he was created from nothing as an instrument of God's for creating the universe. He was therefore different in quality from God. "God is infinite; Christ is finite; therefore God and Christ are essentially different."

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In 325 he was condemned by the Council of Nicaea and exiled; but his teaching caused a debate that engulfed the whole Church; in 379 his teaching was outlawed throughout the Roman Empire but it survived for another 200 years among barbarian tribes in France who were converted to Christianity by Arian bishops.



First Ecumenical Council of the Church
Nicaea, 325 AD



Athanasius

To meet the rising tensions and the growing confusion, Constantine called First Ecumenical (worldwide) Council in Nicaea in 325 AD; all 1800 bishops of the Church throughout Empire were officially invited, but only 318 turned up. Arius was asked to attend along with his leading opponent Athanasius (a deacon). The Council rejected Arius' views and asserted that Jesus is fully God and fully man, and is one with the Father and the Spirit in the unity of the Holy Trinity. You can hear the controversy in the Creed of Nicaea which became the standard of orthodox Christian belief throughout the Roman Empire.

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

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We value the ancient Creeds and Nicene Creed in particular for 5 reasons:

1. They are Trinitarian and Christ-centered: “Jesus Christ” section 6.5 times longer than “Father” section; 3.5 times longer than “Holy Spirit” section. Here is the highest and purest Church affirmation of who Jesus Christ is.

2. They expresses the “doctrinal heart” of our faith: the most crucial Christian beliefs are here; there may be other doctrinal arteries and many other important veins of Christian teaching, but here is the “doctrinal heart” of Gospel. If you want to know if another Church is fully Christian, listen for the heartbeat of the ancient Creeds. The Creed is affirmed by the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox and all the major Churches of the Reformation. Much more Christian truth unites us than divides us. What divides us we must seek to resolve.

3. They are a bridge linking us to the early Church: they links the Christian family today with the Church of the apostles and the Church Fathers: when we repeat the Creeds, we not only join with orthodox Christians throughout world today, but with orthodox Christians in every age who are with us children of the One Father, friends of the One Lord Jesus Christ, and one Temple for Holy Spirit. They link us to that “communion of saints” who have gone before us and in every generation have kept the faith and now await us in heaven.

4. They are a focus for unity and joint-worship: in today's divided Church (UK 250; NI 20+ denominations) they present us with the faith of the undivided Church predating our divisions by 1000 years; while denominations tend to stress their differences with other churches, ancient Creeds remind us just how much we have in common. They are a foundation for joint-worship between Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Pentecostal, not based on the lowest common denominator, but on the fullest statement of essential Christian truth.

5. They protect us against error and confusion: at 15, a friend introduced me to writings of the Jehovah's Witness, a modern version of Arian heresy. After 2 years of confusion I reached same conclusions as Athanasius regarding Christ: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father”. I not only believe it but delight in it; I could have taken another route.

Many Christians are not sure what they believe and strange ideas can take root easily. The best protection against error and confusion is constant exposure to the beauty of Christian truth. Creeds offer us an unparalleled education in the essentials: when we repeated them at worship the truth is absorbed into our minds; when we repeat them with affection they stimulates praise:

“with the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified”.

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PRAYER

*Uphold your Church, O God of truth,
as you upheld your servant Athanasius, to maintain
and proclaim boldly the catholic faith against all opposition,
trusting solely in the grace of your eternal Word,
who took upon himself our humanity
that we might share his divinity;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

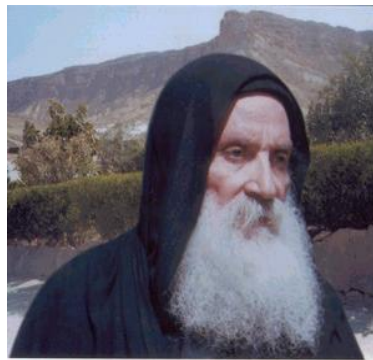
3. The witness of monasticism to the deeper life of complete dedication to Christ



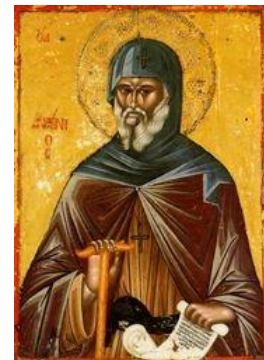
Monasticism emerges most strongly from the eastern churches of the Roman Empire: Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Constantinople. It was at the fringes of the life of the Churches, just as the Qumran monastic community was at the fringes of Judaism. It had little basis in the strong Hebrew-Christian tradition, though John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul were unmarried (didn't Jesus say something about "eunuchs for the kingdom"?).



Simon the Stylite



St. Anthony of Egypt



St. Pachomius of Egypt

It had various forms of expression:

Simon the Stylite of Syria (390-459AD),

St. Anthony of Egypt (251–356AD) pursued the hermit ideal;

Pachomius (292 – 346AD), one of the famous Egyptian Fathers stressed community.

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Some positive aspects of monasticism were

1. A call to the primacy of the Spiritual life: they became people of great spiritual insight, were sought for their advice and spiritual guidance. Many became spiritual advisors to those who wanted to progress in the spiritual life; they devoted themselves to a life of prayer and study for those Christians who were too busy to pray for themselves.

2. A witness to the simplicity of following Christ: with the passage of the great martyrs, they carried forward the ideal of giving up all for Christ: they were a protest movement against spiritual decadence, a reminder to the materialistic world that “man cannot live by bread alone, but on every word that God utters”. They were also a reminder to those who were immersed in the world and all that it had to offer, that if you have God you have discovered the treasure hidden in the field, the treasure beyond all treasures, which the world cannot provide.

3. A prophetic protest against false values: they represented a protest movement against the growing preoccupation of the bishops with power, status, wealth, land. They represented the resurgence of spiritual life and the primacy of God in the life of the Church. The monks looked back to the vigorous spiritual life of the early Church and forward to the imminent return of Jesus Christ in glory.

On the negative side?

1. Monasticism was viewed with caution by the Church in general: as a result of its emphasis on separation from the world, it took many outstandingly spiritual leaders out of congregations that would have needed their gifts in order to grow. It weakened the Church at a leadership level when it needed spiritual reform.

2. It set up a two-tier view of the Christian life: the monks were seen as the super-Christians and the rest of us as ordinary Christians. That is not how the monks saw themselves; but others looked at them in this way. Being a monk was seen as superior than being a carpenter, a teacher, a nurse, a parent, a farmer, a husband, a wife or a person involved in business.

3. They were too individualistic: they did not seem to need the fellowship of the Church, the instruction of its best teachers nor the nourishment of the sacraments of grace. Their sense of responsibility for the transformation of the world around them and their call to mission appear to be weak. They were saintly in many ways, but where is the place of service to others?

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Conclusion: and so by the year 610 the environment in which the Church was living had changed radically from three hundred years earlier when it was 'unbanned' by the Edict of Milan in 313. The Roman Empire was nominally Christian, the missionary spirit was still strong, the Church had settled into orthodox beliefs.



But in 610 in Mecca in Saudi Arabia, a middle aged religious preacher appeared announcing that God had given him special revelations contained in the Koran. His name was Mohammed and Islam was born. It became the biggest threat the Church had ever faced.