

The Story of Christ's Church

The Story of Christ's Church – Part 3

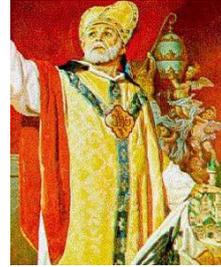
600 – 1500 AD : Chaos, Conflict, Change and Celtic Mission



Chaos:
Barbarian invasion



Conflict:
Rise of Islam



Change:
The Papacy



Mission:
Celtic Saints

A Prayer for the Church of Christ

Eternal God,
You have raised Jesus Christ from the dead
and exalted him to your right hand in glory,
and through him called your Church into being,
that your people might know you,
and that they might make your name known.

We pray for the Church, both universal and local,
for the unity of the Church,
for the doctrinal purity of the Church,
for the ministries of the Church,
for the mission of the Church,
for the renewal of the Church,
and for all Christians in this place.

Eternal God, we give you thanks
for the apostolic Gospel committed to your Church,
for the continuing presence of your Spirit,
for the ministry of Word, Sacrament and Prayer,
for the divine mission in which we are called to share,
for the will to unity and its fruit in common action,
for the faithful witness of those who are true to Christ,
for all works of compassion
and every service that proclaims your love.

In peace and unity
may your people offer the unfailing sacrifice of praise,
and make your glory known;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Aim: to explore what it must have felt like for ordinary people to live through the chaos of the Barbarian invasions, the conflict with an expanding Islam, the aspirations of the Papacy for universal authority, and the beginning of the mission of the Celtic Saints.

Introduction: the story of Christ's Church during the first 600 years is one of expansion, persecution from the Roman authorities, freedom with Constantine's conversion, popularity, tensions over key doctrines, growing unity, prosperity, and the monastic challenge to return to the simplicity of following Christ. Here is a summary :



Expansion:
46 – 48 AD



Banned but expanding
300 AD



Clashing:
Cult of Divine Emperor



Martyrdom:
Polycarp (156 AD)



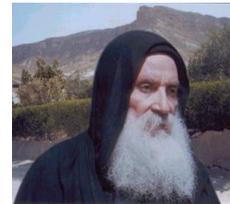
Martyrdom:
Perpetua and Felicity
Carthage 203 AD



Conversion:
Emperor Constantine 1
(306 – 337)



First Ecumenical Council:
Nicaea
325 AD



Monasticism:
Anthony of Egypt

The story of the next 900 years, from 600 to 1500, is one of the collapse of the Roman Empire, the chaos of the Barbarian invasions, the clash with an expanding Islam, the emergence of a strong Papacy in Rome, the division of the Church into East and West and, surprisingly, the dawn of a new age of mission with the Celtic saints. The words of St John 1:5 come to mind:



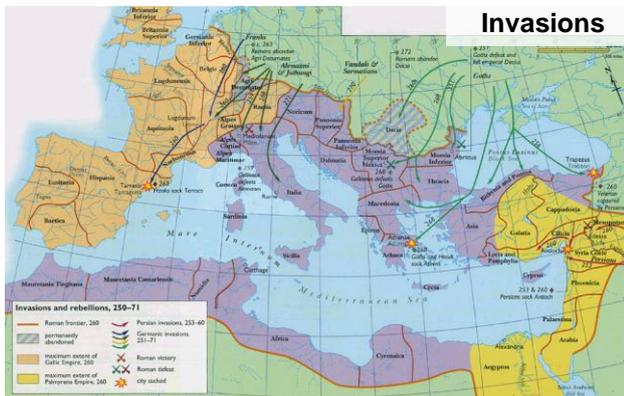
***“The light blazes out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out”***

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1. Chaos: the Barbarian invasions



Aim: what did it feel like for ordinary people to live their lives in the midst of the chaos of the Barbarian invasions?



Ordinary people felt as though the world was coming to an end. The Roman Empire, founded by E. Augustus in 27BC, was collapsing. It had lasted for 450 years, stretched from Britain to Babylon and brought the benefits of the Roman Peace, good government, just laws, security, great roads, efficient fire brigades, central heating in homes and a flourishing economy.

People felt blessed by God to live under such good rulers. Now it was falling apart. Pagan tribes from central Asia were pushing into Europe, hungry for land. They were called Barbarians because their strange languages sounded like “bar ... bar”. The Franks invaded France, the Goths swept down into Italy, the Vandals into Spain and the Angles and Saxons crossed from Denmark and Germany to invade Britain. Everywhere along the 10,000-mile border of the empire, there was war. A Roman army of 400,000 could not hold the northern frontier along the Rhine and the river Danube. The ruthless tribes poured in, slaughtering people in towns and villages and driving the population off their land. Lawlessness, genocide, ethnic cleansing, chaos and conflict were everywhere. In 476 the Germanic chief Odoacer sacked Rome, deposed the Emperor Romulus Augustulus, and made himself king of Italy. The Western Roman Empire crumbled. The eastern empire around Constantinople lasted another 1000 years.



North West Europe shook under the Viking invasions from Scandanavia from 790-1100. These warrior-seamen terrorised Britain, Ireland, Germany, France, Spain and Italy. Eventually they settled down and the Rus in Kiev gave their name to Russia and they left their mark on our language: Tuesday: Thiu, god of war; Wednesday: Woden, chief god; Thursday: Thor, god of thunder; Friday: Fro, the god of love; Easter: Ostara, goddess of morning light.

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A Roman poet in the 400s wrote:
*See how quickly death comes upon the world,
and how many people the violence of war has killed.
Some lay as food for dogs;
others were killed by the flames that destroyed their homes.
In the villages and country houses, in the fields and in the countryside,
on every road- death, sorrow, slaughter, and fires.*

For the conquering hordes it was a time of seizing the opportunities that brute force provides at the expense of the weak. Might was right. For their victims it was an age of anxiety and despair. The face of this mother during the Balkans conflict captures well what it must have been like. They must have often prayed, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I cry desperately for help, but still it does not come" (Psalm 22).

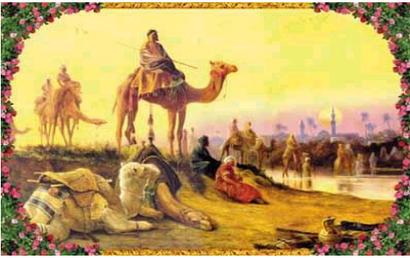
2. Conflict: The rise of Islam and the birth of the crusades



Aim: what did it feel like for ordinary people to live their lives in the midst of the conflict with an expanding Islam?

While the Church in W Europe was reeling from collapse of Roman Empire, another major threat erupted in the east: Islam.

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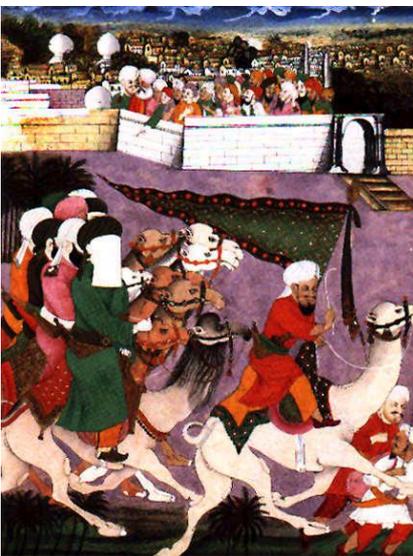


In 570 in Mecca in Saudi Arabia, a orphan-child was born called Muhammad. He was brought up by his uncle to be a shepherd and camel-driver; at 25 he married and lived a prosperous life as a merchant in Mecca; at 40, while in the desert, he had a vision of the archangel Gabriel calling him, it is said, to preach a message of absolute monotheism and uncompromising morality – the same message, it is

claimed, of Abraham, the prophets and Jesus Christ. At 43 he began preaching, attacking the corruption of the rich families in Mecca who were flaunting their wealth in the face of the poor and exploiting the multitudes of pilgrims who flocked to Mecca to worship their gods among the 365 god-idols inside the Kaaba. In 622 Mecca rejected him and he fled to Medina where he formed the first Muslim community around his core beliefs. By the time he died ten years later (632) he was chief of all Arabia and had made Mecca the centre of pilgrimage of Muslims. (Islam means “submission to will of Allah/God”; Muslim means “those who submit”; they dislike being called Mohammedan; today there are c600m).



Mecca, the Great Mosque, the Ka'ba



This new religion spread rapidly after Muhammad's death: the first caliph (successor), **Abu Bakr**, launched a holy war to convert people to Islam. Within 12 years he controlled the largely Christian areas of Syria, Egypt and parts of Persia. By 750 Islam had captured the Christian regions of North Africa and most of Spain and Portugal. The Islamic Empire stretched from Spain to India and lasted for over 600 years (632 – 1256). It encouraged international trade and academic learning; it was ahead of Europe in art, science and medicine. As Christianity shrank, Islam expanded.

The Church's response to the rise of Islam was the Crusades, the wars of 'the Cross', for the Cross which was painted on the shields of the soldiers. The armies saw themselves 'fighting for God' and the soldiers viewed themselves as 'soldiers of Christ' and ordinary believers saw the Crusaders as saints fighting a holy war.



The Five Christian Crusades:
1095 – 1221

FROM THE 5th CRUSADE: THE TAKING OF DAMIETTA

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The motives for the Crusades were complex: the powerful Christian kings of the west would come to the support of the threatened Churches of the East; the Christian armies would stop the spread of Islam any further into Europe; they would open up again Christian pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land; they would win back lost land and seize the huge wealth accumulating under Muslim rule; by fighting for Christ, they would gain forgiveness for their sins and the sins of their families in this world and the next; they would enhance the power and prestige of the Popes who preached the necessity for the Crusades.

How should we evaluate the crusades?

- 1) They failed in their objectives:** despite impassioned pleas by some Popes to reconquer the Holy Land from the Muslims, the Crusades met with diminishing effect. For 200 years Christians fought over the Holy Land, but in the end Jerusalem was still in Muslim hands.
- 2) They left a enduring legacy of bitterness in Muslim minds:** to this day you still never refer to “crusades” when speaking with Muslims. Some Christians, before the dawn of the new millennium, walked across Europe following the route of the crusaders to apologise to the Muslim communities for what was done to them in the name of Christ.
- 3) They stimulated alternative Christian approaches to Islam:** in 1219 Francis of Assisi travelled to Egypt to convert the Sultan but was unsuccessful; the Dominican missionary Raymond Lull argued for peaceful missions, not armed expeditions: *“Missionaries will convert the world by preaching, but also through the shedding of their own tears and blood, and with great labour and through a bitter death.”*

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3. Change: The highs and lows of the Papacy



Aim: what did it feel like for ordinary people to live through the highs and lows of the Papacy?

From Constantine's conversion in 312 to the Reformation there were 180 bishops of Rome. It marked a period of highs and lows for the Papacy.

Up to 600AD, the bishop of Rome was viewed with respect and affection by the whole Church. At first all the western bishops were called 'papa = father', but by 500 AD the term is restricted to the Bishop of Rome. He was '*primus inter pares*' – the first among equals. The Roman Church was respected because it was in Rome that St Peter was martyred and St Paul was buried. Continuing the faith of these two apostles was indeed a high calling. Up to 600 AD a high standard of Christian leadership was given.



The most important of the pre-Reformation popes was **Pope Gregory the Great (590 - 604)**, the first real Pope who claimed responsibility for and authority over the whole Church of Christ as "the universal bishop". These claims were hotly contested by the Eastern Church, where the Patriarch of Constantinople called himself "the Ecumenical Patriarch". Gregory was a missionary pope: one day, when walking through the slave market in Rome he saw some fair-haired slaves. "*Where are they from?*" he asked. "*Oh, they're Angles!*" "*They're not angles,*" he said, "*they're angels!*". So he sent missionaries to Canterbury in the Kingdom of

Kent in Britain to evangelise them. He sent other teams to Spain and Gaul. He was a reforming pope: he sought to purify the Church, deposing lazy bishops, stopping simony, the selling the office of bishop to the highest bidder. He had a strong commitment to the poor, set up a standard pattern of worship through the Church and compiled the famous *Gregorian Chants*.

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The relationship between the western Church and the Eastern Church got worse over two centuries: Pope Nicolas 1 (858-867) excommunicated Patriarch Photius of Constantinople, who in turn excommunicated him. The last Ecumenical Council of the whole Church took place in 869. Finally, the division of Christendom was sadly completed in 1054.

For almost two hundred years the Papacy hit an all-time low known as the Dark Ages. From Pope Adrian II in 867 to Pope Damascus II (1048), the Papacy was known for its bribery, corruption, immorality and bloodshed. Reforming figures such as Pope Gregory VII, Bernard of Clairvaux and St Francis of Assisi challenged the darkness.

However, the position of Pope became ever more powerful. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) claimed virtual papal infallibility, taught transubstantiation, forbade reading the Bible in the language of the people, and ordered heretics to be burned to death through the Inquisition. As the Vicar of Christ, he claimed sovereignty over the Church and the world, controlled States and kings and ordered two crusades.

Just before the Reformation in 1517 was another time of darkness: the Papacy splint into two for 100 years (1377-1417) with two sets of popes –at Avignon in France and at Rome; they anathematise each other, while their successors once again plunge into lives of extreme luxury, immorality, simony and cruelty.



St Peter's Square, Rome

How should we view the Papacy?

- 1) It is a natural development over centuries as a pattern of hierarchy develops;
- 2) It is capable of being an instrument in the hands of Christ for good;
- 3) It is capable of corruption;
- 4) It is also capable of being self-critical and reforming.

Many of its weaknesses were to be repeated within Protestantism. People often says that "Rome never changes!" If you read its history one thing is clear: "It often does!"

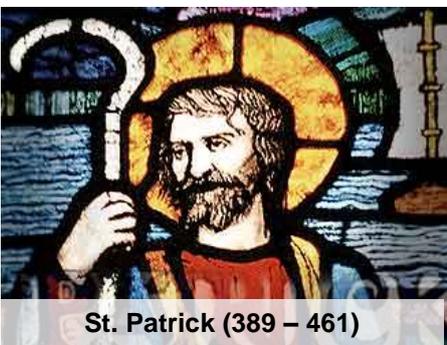
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4. A candle of hope is lit: the mission of the Celtic Saints



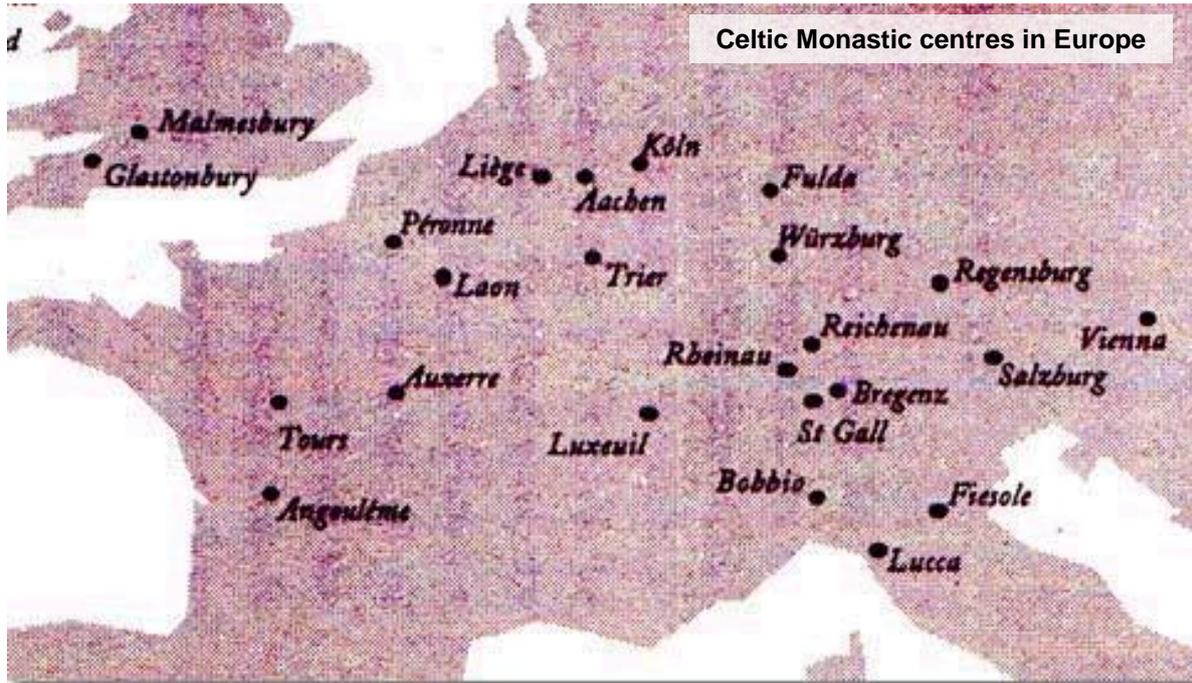
Aim: to explore what it must have felt like for ordinary people to see their fellow Christians leave home to share the Gospel in the difficult places of Europe

Over the centuries from 600 – 1500 AD chaos, conflict and change had darkened the face of Europe. It threatened and damaged the witness of Christ's Church, both externally and internally. But the light of Christ was not extinguished. In many unexpected places Christians were seeking to reach out with the message of God's love and the story of Jesus.



One of the most remarkable ventures of faith took place in our own small island. It begins with the story of St. Patrick. It was when he was captured by Irish slave-traders in Briton and brought to County Antrim at the age of 16, that God touched Patrick's heart and started changing his life. After his escape from Ireland, he was called back by God and arrived in 432, building his first church at Saul, near Downparick. Over the next thirty years he saw thousands of Irish people come to Christ, live changed lives, offered for ordination. Some became monks and studied at our best monastic schools.

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Over the next 150 years, 1000 Irish missionaries, inspired by the missionary zeal of St Patrick, left Ireland to bring the Gospel message to a western Europe convulsed with conflict and violence. Most set out never to return. Those to whom they went knew little or nothing about Christ; few could read or write. These Irish missionaries established centres of faith, spirituality and learning all over Europe.

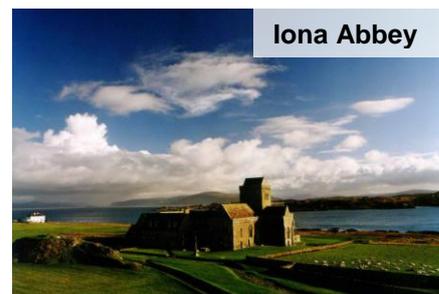


St. Brendan (c 486 - 578) from Tralee, County Kerry, was monastery educated. He became a priest within the Celtic Church in Ireland and then travelled with many disciples to Brittany in France and as far as the Canary Islands of the coast of N. Africa.

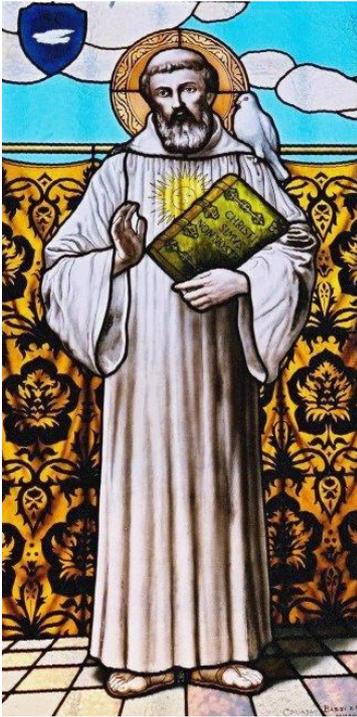


St. Columba (521-597) was born in County Donegal of royal parentage; he studied under St. Finnian at Clonard and founded monasteries

in Derry and in Durrow, Co. Offaly. When he was 42 he sailed with twelve disciples to Iona (W. Scotland). From Iona he spear-headed the evangelisation of the Pictish tribes beyond the Grampian mountains. He also travelled to the Hebrides and Orkneys. He is called the "apostle of Caledonia". His disciples brought the Gospel to Holy Island in Northumberland, and from there much of England was evangelised.



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St. Columbanus of Nobber

St. Columbanus (c 543-615) was born in Leinster and studied under St. Comgall in the monastery at Bangor. When he was 40 he travelled to Europe with 12 disciples and founded several monasteries in NE France. He also travelled to Bobbio in Lombardy (Italy) where he founded a monastery in 612, which is his burial place.



Basilica of St. Columbanus in Bobbio



St. Gall's Cathedral,
Appenzell (Switzerland)

In 7th century St Gall, a companion of St. Columbanus, travelled into Switzerland, and established a monastery which later became a Benedictine Abbey, famous for its contributions to faith, education and literature.

Conclusion: when it seemed the world was coming to an end, when the Church was in despair, when heathenism reigned in Europe's chaos and when the last vestiges of civilization were vanishing, God "*chose what the world calls weak to confound the strong*"; darkness and death gave place to light and resurrection.