



UNIT 4

THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

IN THIS unit you will learn about the fall of a great institution and the rise of an even greater one. You will read how the Roman Empire of the West perished, and how the Roman Catholic Church, founded by Christ, flourished in spite of attacks by Romans, barbarians, and Moslems.

While the Roman Empire was at its height, there occurred in Bethlehem the great event which mankind had been waiting for. The conditions of the Jewish prophecies were fulfilled, and Christ, our Redeemer, was born.

This is the great, central fact of all history. The teachings of Christ and the Catholic Church have had an important effect on the lives of men ever since. You will see in this unit kings and slaves, soldiers and scholars enroll under the banner of Christ.

You already know how the early Christians were forced to suffer persecution from some of the Roman emperors. At the same time, the mighty Roman Empire was beginning to break up. When the Teutonic tribes attacked the Western Roman Empire, that institution disappeared from history.

The Catholic Church survived both the cruel persecutions of the Romans and the fierce onslaughts of the barbarians. The Church then turned its attention to a great and glorious mission, which was to convert and civilize the peoples of Europe. You will learn how the zeal and ardor of monks and missionaries brought about the triumph of Christianity over paganism not only within the civilized empire but among the barbarian tribes as well.



CHAPTER 7

THE FOUNDING OF CHRISTIANITY

The Birth of Christ

Fulfillment of Prophecy. When Augustus ordered that a census should be taken of all the people throughout the Roman Empire, he did not know how important his edict would be. An event was to take place in a far-off section of the empire which would be the most important event in all history.

Judea, the land of the Jews, was at this time under the control of the Romans. King Herod, who came from a land south of Judea, ruled for the Romans in Jerusalem. Now the prophets had foretold that when a stranger became the ruler of Jerusalem, the Jews could expect the Messias. Pious Jews began to look for the Messias, who was to be the Saviour.

Augustus helped to fulfill some of the other prophecies about the birth of Christ. St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary were descended from King David. It was necessary for them to journey from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, which was the city of David, in order to be enrolled in the census. There, in a stable in which Joseph and

Mary had sought refuge for the night, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born. All these details had been foretold by the prophet Isaias.

The birth of Christ is the central point in all history. We date all previous events as so many years B. C., that is, Before Christ. All events after the birth of Christ are dated with the label A. D. This is an abbreviation for two Latin words, "Anno Domini,"¹ which mean "In the Year of Our Lord."

The coming of the Son of God into the world changed the lives of men. His teachings affected their ideas, their beliefs, and their actions.

Life of Christ. Jesus, as you know, spent the early part of His life at Nazareth. Jesus was obedient to Joseph and Mary. The Holy Family had happy days together.

At about the age of thirty, Jesus began His public life. He preached to the Jews and gathered about Him a faithful band of apostles and disciples. He worked many miracles as proof that He was the Son of God.

But Christ had many enemies, who plotted against Him. They finally succeeded in having Him sentenced to death. He was nailed to a cross and suffered death. But three days later, on the first Easter, He arose from the dead, giving final proof that He was God.

1. Anno Domini (ăn'ô dôm'ĩ nĩ)

For forty days He remained on earth, preparing the apostles and disciples for the task of spreading His teachings to the whole world. Then He ascended into heaven. But before He left, He had promised that He would send the Holy Ghost to guide His followers, and to remain with them forever.

The Beginnings of the Church

The Apostles. The history of the Church began with the first Pentecost. Ten days after the Ascension of Our Lord, the Holy Ghost descended upon the apostles. They were filled with great courage and began at once to preach to the people of Jerusalem. They won three thousand converts the first day.

The apostles at first preached only to the Jews in Judea and the neighboring countries. But they remembered that Christ had told them to "go and teach all nations." They gradually left Jerusalem and journeyed throughout the Roman Empire. From the very earliest days, the religion of Christ was Catholic, which means "universal."

St. Peter. As soon as Christ began to select His apostles, it was clear that St. Peter was to be their leader. In fact, Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter, a word that means "rock." Christ said to him, "Thou art Peter (the rock) and upon this rock I will build My Church."

After preaching in many cities of the East, Peter went to the most important city in the world—Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Peter also made it the capital of the new Church of Christ. He himself was the Bishop of Rome. Since his time the Bishops of Rome have been the heads of the Church. They have the title of "Pope." This word means "father." The Pope serves as a loving father for the whole Church. We often call the Pope "the Holy Father."

St. Peter died a martyr. He was crucified, like Christ. But he asked to be crucified upside down, as he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as Christ.

St. Paul. The greatest preacher of the early Church was St. Paul. When he first came to Jerusalem, he was known as Saul of Tarsus. He became one of the chief persecutors of the Christians, as the followers of Christ were called. He was present at the death of St. Stephen, the first martyr.

But God called him to be a great apostle. After his baptism he became known as Paul. He earned the title "Apostle of the Gentiles." This means that he preached the gospel of Christ to the people who were not Jews.

Paul was a man of great energy and was filled with a great love for God. He stirred the converts to great enthusiasm for the teachings of Christ. He

founded churches in many cities of the Roman Empire. He wrote many letters to these churches while he journeyed throughout the Mediterranean area. These letters are the Epistles which are read daily in the Mass. St. Peter, St. James, and St. John also wrote Epistles.

St. Paul finally went to Rome, where he, too, suffered martyrdom. He was beheaded. Because he was a Roman citizen, he could not be crucified.

The Christians Are Persecuted

The Persecutions. Even during the lifetime of the apostles, the companions of Christ, the Church grew to a remarkable extent. It grew so large that it aroused the hatred and hostility of the Romans. The emperors began to fear and hate the Christians. The Christians would not go to the temples and worship the pagan gods of Rome. Many of the emperors after Augustus wished to be worshipped as gods. The Christians said that there was but one true God.

So the emperors began to persecute the Christians. There were ten serious persecutions in all. The first was under the cruel emperor Nero. During his reign both St. Peter and St. Paul suffered martyrdom. The Christians, however, faced death with courage and even with joy. The apostles themselves had given the example of willingness to die

for Christ and His teachings. All of the apostles died as martyrs except St. John. Even he suffered many tortures. By a miracle, he escaped from a cauldron of burning oil at Rome.

The Romans thought that they could make the Christians give up their religion. They forced the



Early Christians Worshipping in the Catacombs

followers of Christ to suffer the most horrible and inhuman punishments. They might cover the Christians with tar and burn them as torches. They might throw them to the wild beasts in the Colosseum² for the amusement of the Roman mob. There

2. Colosseum (kōl'ō sē'ūm)

were almost as many different types of cruel punishment as there were martyrs.

The Catacombs. During the worst of the persecutions, the Christians were forced to go underground. They took refuge in passageways and rooms which they hollowed out under the city of Rome. Here, in these underground rooms called catacombs, the priest said Mass, and the faithful received Holy Communion. Here, too, the Christians buried their dead.

We have a reminder of the catacombs in each of our churches today. In the catacombs the priest usually said Mass over the tomb of a martyr. Today in the center of each altar is an altar stone which contains the relics of some martyr.

The Growth of Christianity

The Christian Martyrs. In spite of the persecutions, the Christians continued to grow in numbers. Hundreds might be martyred, but thousands became converted. When the Romans saw that the Christians were ready to suffer torture and even death because of their belief in God, they came to realize that the Christian religion was the true religion. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" became a famous saying.

What Christ Taught. The teachings of Christ attracted people to the Church which He had

founded. For the peoples conquered by the Romans, and for all those who had been made slaves, Christ had the message of hope, "Come to me you who are heavily burdened and I will refresh you." Christ taught that all human beings were equal in the sight of God. The slave was equal to his master, the wife to her husband, and no race was better than another. This equality of all men is the basis of democracy.

Under the pagan governments women were considered to be inferior to men. Their fathers or their husbands had absolute control over them. But Christ taught that they had the same rights and privileges as men. The honor paid to the Blessed Mother brought a new respect for womanhood. One of the first results of Christianity was an improvement in the position of women.

Christ made it clear that He came to save all men. He gave the commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." He explained that the members of the whole human race should be considered as one's neighbors. From the beginning of the Church the faithful gave help to the needy.

The peoples of the ancient world, when at war, had always taken "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But Christ commanded, "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you . . . so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Although Christ had given a great deal of attention to the poor and oppressed, many of the proud and noble Romans were attracted to His Church. Army leaders, businessmen, and advisers of the emperors, as well as the common people and the slaves, became Christians.

The Growth of the Church. The teachings of Christ and His Church had an important influence on the lives of those who became Christians. They were inspired to lead pure and holy lives. In fact, the good example that the early Christians gave to their neighbors and fellow workers was one of the main reasons for the rapid growth of the Church.

In several practical ways the Roman Empire itself helped the spread of Christianity. All the peoples of the known world were united under the rule of Rome, and the world was at peace. This meant that it was easier for the apostles to spread the teachings of Christ, because there were no wars to prevent them from going where they wished. The great network of Roman roads provided safe and quick travel.

The common use of two languages, Greek and Latin, by all the nations of the Roman Empire made it easier for the early Christians to spread the gospel. For instance, St. Paul spoke Greek very well. In his wonderful sermons at Athens and Corinth, he was able to be understood by all the people.

Freedom for the Church. The worst persecution of the Church began while Diocletian³ was emperor of Rome, and lasted from 303 to 311 A. D. However, the next emperor, Constantine, was friendly



The Cross Appearing in the Sky before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge

to the Christians. His mother, St. Helena, was a Christian and is famous because she discovered the True Cross of Christ at Jerusalem.

Constantine had to wage war with a rival for the throne. Just before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge near Rome, in the year 312 A. D., a cross

3. Diocletian (dī'ò klě'shǎn)

appeared in the sky to Constantine. On the cross was written "In this sign conquer." Constantine immediately placed a cross on each standard of his legions.

Although outnumbered three to one, Constantine won the battle. He did not immediately become a Christian. But the next year, 313 A. D., he issued an edict, or law, which gave the Christians permission to practice their religion freely. This was called the Edict of Milan. The Christians were now free to come out of the catacombs.

In the year 305 A. D., Christianity was a religion despised and persecuted by the Roman emperors. By 395 A. D., the Roman emperors had made Christianity the religion of the state. The pagan temples were closed or were taken over by the Christians. Pagan gods were no longer worshipped at Rome or in any city of the empire. All the festivals in honor of the pagan gods, including the Olympic Games, were abolished. The pagan civilizations of Greece and Rome had nothing more to contribute.

The Organization of the Church

The Leaders of the Church. Even during the persecutions the Church had grown to such an extent that it needed organization and order. By the time it became free under Constantine, it had a government well established.

Christ Himself started the organization of the Church when He chose twelve apostles and seventy-two disciples. To the apostles He gave full powers to perform all the sacraments. They became the first bishops of the Church. They in turn ordained other bishops and left them as overseers in the chief cities of the empire. Later each diocese was put in charge of a bishop.

As the Church grew, each province was placed in charge of an archbishop. The bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch,⁴ Constantinople, and Alexandria were known as patriarchs, a title which they have even today.

Christ made St. Peter the visible head of the Church. Throughout the New Testament the apostles recognized St. Peter's authority. St. Peter was the first Bishop of Rome. Since then each Pope, St. Peter's successor as Bishop of Rome, has likewise been the visible head of the Church.

Assisting the bishops were the priests and deacons. Priests were ordained by the bishops and had the power to say Mass and to perform most of the sacraments. The deacons had charge of the charitable duties of the Church. They visited the sick and gave food and clothing to the poor.

The Church borrowed several good ideas from the Roman Empire. For instance, a diocese was a

4. Antioch (ăn'tĩ ök)

division of the empire. The Christians also began to build their churches like the basilicas, or law courts, of the Romans. Furthermore, the vestments which the priest wears at Mass are developments of two Roman garments—the toga and the tunic.

The Council of Nicaea. After Constantine freed the Church from persecution, the Church began the practice of holding councils of bishops to discuss problems. These were held under the leadership of the Pope. The first of these was held in the year 325 A. D. at Nicaea⁵ in Asia Minor. Some people had denied that Christ was God. The council decided that Christ was divine and equal with God the Father.

The council also wrote a profession of faith for all true Christians. This is known as the Nicene Creed. It is said by the priest at every Mass every Sunday and on great feasts. You probably say a shorter and older creed—the Apostles' Creed.

AN OUTLINE OF THIS CHAPTER

1. The central point in history—the birth of Christ
2. The life of Christ
3. The founding of the Church
4. St. Peter, the head of the Church
5. The missionary work of St. Paul
6. The persecution of the Christians
7. The Church in the catacombs

5. Nicaea (nĩ sē'ä)

8. Christianity attracts all classes of people
9. Christianity wins its freedom
10. The organization of the Church

STUDY EXERCISES

1. Why is the birth of Christ the central point in history?
2. How did Christ prepare for the Church while He was on earth?
3. How did Christ make it clear that St. Peter was to be the visible head of the Church?
4. Describe the missionary work of St. Paul.
5. How did the Roman emperors persecute the Christians?
6. Why did the Church attract so many people?
7. Show how the teachings of Christ and His Church affected the lives of the Christians.
8. What was the importance of the Edict of Milan?
9. Describe the manner in which the Catholic Church was organized.
10. What was the importance of the Council of Nicaea?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Read again in your Bible history the life of Christ and His founding of the Church.
2. Draw a map showing the journeys of St. Peter and St. Paul. Consult your Bible history.
3. Give a report on the life of St. Stephen, the first martyr, or St. Helena, who found the True Cross of Christ.
4. Place in your scrapbook pictures of the life of Christ, the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, and the apostles.

CHAPTER 8

BARBARIAN TRIBES INVADE THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The Weakened Empire

Division of the Roman Empire. For about three hundred years after the time of Augustus, the Roman Empire remained strong and powerful. But it was hard for the emperor living at Rome to keep in close touch with the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. Large armies had to be kept in this area to hold back the enemies who tried to invade the empire.

When Constantine became emperor, he wanted to strengthen his hold over this eastern territory. He decided to build a new capital and to locate it in the East. The new capital was named Constantinople, that is, the city of Constantine. In 1929 the Turks changed its name to Istanbul.¹

If you turn to the map on page 161, you will see why Constantinople became an important city. It is located on the narrow strip of water which forms the only passage for ships going from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. And, also, it is on one of the leading land routes between Asia and Europe.

1. Istanbul (ē'stān bōōl')