The Pagan-Buster
How a brilliant monk laid the groundwork for Christian Europe

"Irony" seems a concept invented for such a situation as this: The man historian Christopher Dawson once called the most influential Englishman who ever lived is the patron saint of … Germany.

There is one more layer of seeming irony in this story of the man who evangelized Germany and set the stage for Western Christendom: he was a monk.

Before we get to the man himself, we should think about this fact. Every modern person knows that monks lived out their lives in cloistered irrelevancy, too busy with the inward pursuit of holiness to do much to change the course of history—right? Wrong, of course. Thomas Cahill has busted that myth with his paean to Irish monasticism, How the Irish Saved Civilization. But it lives on, perpetuated by Hollywood and Madison Ave.

In fact, in the centuries that followed the fall of Rome to the barbarian tribes, it was the monks who did most to convert the conquerors to the religion of the conquered. Monastics were used by Gregory the Great (540-604) and the Roman Christians. The most famous of these was the "apostle to England," Augustine of Canterbury, who missionized England in 597-604/5. And Celtic—that is, Irish—monks did much to bring the Christian faith to the European continent. The star here was Willibrord, who led a highly succesful mission in the area of modern-day Belgium and Holland from 690 on.

Typically, a cluster of 10 or 12 pioneer monk-missionaries would come to a new—and thoroughly pagan—area, set up a church, bring people into the fellowship, teach, and train leaders. During their mission, they would plant crops, acquire herds, and live as normal citizens. But once the church was well established in that area, they would move on to the next place.

These were well-disciplined groups, rotated regularly, and closely bound to the other communities of their order and the mother house. They were supported, prayed for, financially benefited by their brotherhood back home.

They preached in the vernacular. And in environments of age-old, entrenched native religions, they made blunt, unflattering comparisons to Christianity of specific elements of Paganism. Willibrord, for instance, might preach: "It is not God that you worship but the Devil, who has deceived you O king into the vilest error. There is no God but the one God. …"

No one exemplified the courage and commitment of these "shock troops" of early Christian Europe better than St. Boniface, our English patron saint of Germany.

A colleague of Willibrord, Boniface lived from 680 to 754. Born with the name Wynfrith, in south Devon, he was given to God by his father when the latter recovered miraculously from a serious illness. At age five, Wynfrith entered a monastery at Exeter.

The boy soon showed himself both brilliant and spiritually mature. He rose quickly through the ranks and could have become abbot of an English monastery. But the missionary spirit burned within him, and he led a party of monks to Frisia (today a province in the north of Holland), where Willibrord had begun the work of evangelization. This, in John Fines's picturesque phrase, was "a dank land, dissected by waterways and haunted by mists."

This mission, however, was cut short. Radbod, the Frisian king, was brutally re-imposing paganism on this area. So Wynfrith went to Rome in 718, where Pope Gregory II gave him the name "Boniface" (one who utters good), and sent him on a mission to the North. An 8th-century life of Boniface tells the story:

"The saint was sent by the pope to make a report on the savage peoples of Germany. The purpose of this was to discover whether their untutored hearts and minds were ready to receive the divine Word. … In Thuringia, … by preaching the Gospel and turning their minds away from evil towards a life of virtue and the observance of canonical decrees he reproved, admonished and instructed to the best of his ability the priests and the elders, some of whom devoted themselves to the true worship of Almighty God. …"

Then Radbod died, and under the sponsorship of Charles Martel, Boniface and his group returned to Frisia. There, the king's death "permitted [Boniface] to scatter abroad the seed of Christian teaching and to feed with wholesome doctrine those who had been famished by pagan superstition. The divine light illumined their hearts, the sovereignty of duke Charles [Martel] over the Frisians was established, the word of truth was blazoned abroad, [and] the voice of the preachers filled the land."

In 721 Boniface went to the German province of Hesse, where there were Christians, but many unconverted as well. That same 8th-century Life of Boniface relates a famous "power encounter," reminiscent of Elijah's challenge to the priests of Baal, that epitomizes the clash between Christianity and paganism in old Europe:

"Now many of the Hessians who at that time had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the Church in their entirety.

"Moreover, some continued secretly, others openly, to offer sacrifices to trees and springs, to inspect the entrails of victims; some practiced divination, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries, auspices and other sacrificial rites; whilst others, of a more reasonable character, forsook all the profane practices of heathenism and committed none of these crimes.

"With the counsel and advice of the latter persons, Boniface in their presence attempted to cut down, at a place called Gaesmere, a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Jupiter.

"Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut, suddenly the oak's vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above, crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches into fragments in its fall. As if by the express will of God (for the brethren present had done nothing to cause it) the oak burst asunder into four parts, each part having a trunk of equal length.

"At the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord. Thereupon the holy bishop took counsel with the brethren, built an oratory from the timber of the oak and dedicated it to St. Peter the Apostle.

"By this means the report of his preaching reached far-off lands so that within a short space of time his fame resounded throughout the greater part of Europe. From Britain an exceedingly large number of holy men came to his aid. … Working in widely scattered groups among the people of Hesse and Thuringia, they preached the Word of God in the country districts and villages. The number of Hessians and Thuringians who received the sacraments of the faith was enormous and many thousands of them were baptized."

Of course, this single event did not really end all "cursing in the hearts" of the Pagans. John Fines, in Who's Who in the Middle Ages, gives us a sense of the courage required to profess the Gospel in that pagan land: "The monasteries [Boniface] set up were like castles in an alien land, and his converts often went in fear of their lives." Nonetheless, says Fines, "crowds of scholars and missionaries" came from England to join Boniface in his work.

Nor was all of these missionaries' work of the "power encounter" variety. Letters still exist from the Bishop of Winchester, who wrote to Boniface about how to argue the "heathen" out of their pagan beliefs. Fines paraphrases one such argument: "Don't argue about the genealogies of their gods. Accept that they were born like men, and so must be men; if they still doubt, ask them where their gods lived before the creation of the universe—that will stump them; if they claim that the universe has always been there, ask them how the gods came to rule it."

Boniface continued, in the monastic tradition, to study as best he could in a wild land with no access to such libraries as the fine one then being developed at the English see of York. Fines relates, "He would write again and again to English libraries and to Rome to get his materials and check his references. A slow business, but what joy when a parcel of books finally did arrive!"

By 739 Boniface, a brilliant administrator as well as a scholar and missionary, became head of the Roman church's whole missionary enterprise. He took a hand in the reformation of the Frankish (french) church and laid the groundwork for Charlemagne's era of Christian religious reform.

At last in 753, Boniface turned back to the mission to Frisia. There, as Fines tells it, "he had great success, christening converts in their thousands, and encamped for the winter with the sense of satisfaction of one who has returned to his oldest love." The following year he began again, with much the same success. But this was soon to be cut short when "his little band was attacked by a crowd of angry pagans."

"He refused to allow his followers to show the least sign of resistance, as always conscious of the missionary's prime task of setting an example, and, perhaps, moved by the desire for a martyr's crowning.

"The pagans cut him and his 53 followers to pieces, and leaving the dead scattered around the fields, hurried off with their booty. They carried away Boniface's heavy chests, and finally set them down; but before they could be opened, a great quarrel sprang up about the division of the loot. A mad struggle ensued, culminating in the survival of the fittest few, and finally the chests were burst open. Instead of silver and gold, they found books, which they flung aside in fury, sure that at the bottom they would find riches: but each and every chest contained books—the library that Boniface had begged, steadily, book by book, throughout his long and weary life. In their rage they scattered the manuscripts, swinging madly at them with their swords, and of the three that were rescued for the library at Fulda (where Boniface himself was finally buried, according to his wish), one is almost completely cut through."

Fines concludes that Boniface's chief characteristics were courage and affection for his people. "He loved people as a missionary should, but very rarely do we find a missionary with such depth of affection as his." Yet when necessary, he did not hesitate to reprove archbishops, kings, and even the pope. "He was a muscular Christian who loved and was beloved but he was not soft."

Today we can pray that the people who go out to spread the gospel on new frontiers would be as loving and courageous as Boniface. Specifically, we can ask that Western missionaries will build bridges between their compatriots and the evangelized people groups just as Boniface did between his English fellows and the converts of Frisia.

http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2004/jun10.html?start=1

Charlemagne
Christian ruler of a "holy" empire

Pepin III, King of the Franks, knelt with his sons to be anointed by Pope Stephen III in conscious imitation of the anointing of King David by the prophet Samuel. And like David's son Solomon, Pepin's son Charles would preside over a renowned cultural and religious flowering.

Expanding borders

Charles received his education from his mother and the monks of Saint Denis. He could speak and read Latin and his native Germanic tongue, but he never learned to write, though he tried to his entire life. He mastered the military and political arts close to his father's throne.

When Pepin died in 768, Charles was in his mid-20s: vital, energetic, and at six feet three-and-a-half-inches tall, he towered over his subjects. When his brother, Carloman, died in 771, Charles was left as sole ruler of the Franks.

Charles's early reign was marked by incessant warfare, which expanded his control in all directions. His longest wars (772–785) were in an area just below modern Denmark, against the Saxons. As he conquered, he converted them to Christianity at the point of the sword.

Pope Hadrian then asked for his help in the south, calling on Charles to deliver him from the Lombards. Charles obliged and quickly compelled the Lombard king to retire to a monastery. He took the crown for himself in 774, and now ruled over much of what is modern Italy. During an Easter visit to Rome that year he was greeted by the pope with the words; "Behold another Constantine, who has risen in our times."

Charles's 778 campaign against the Spanish Moors did not go as well and he was forced to withdraw. (An unimportant defeat in the Pyrenees formed the theme of the heroic epic, The Song of Roland, one of the most widely read poems of the Middle Ages.) Charles was determined to establish a secure border south of the Pyrenees, and he finally did so in 801, when he captured Barcelona.

In the meantime, he had turned his attention to the southeast border of his lands and conquered and absorbed Bavaria. Looking southeast, he pushed farther east along the Danube River into the territory of the Avars. His defeat of these fierce warriors not only netted him 15 large wagons of gold and silver but highlighted his political and military superiority to the Byzantine Empire to the east.

New Roman emperor

His triumph culminated on Christmas 800, when in one of the best known scenes of the Middle Ages, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne "Emperor of the Romans."

Charles told his biographer that he attended the service unaware that the pope was going to do this, but modern historians discount this as overly modest. In addition to complex political reasons for wanting the caption, Charles had theological reasons. Charles was also a great student of Augustine, much taken with his idea of the City of God. He believed the church and state should be allied as forces in the unification of society.

Charles delineated the roles of state and church in a letter to Pope Leo: "Our task [as secular ruler] is externally, with God's help, to defend with our arms the holy Church of Christ against attacks by the heathen from any side and against devastation by the infidels and, internally, to strengthen the Church by the recognition of the Catholic faith. Your share, Most Holy Father, is to support our army with hands upraised to God, as did Moses in ancient days, so that the … name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified throughout the world."

Charles, then, believed the caption, "Emperor of the Romans," made him the successor of the Roman emperors. (Never mind that the Byzantine emperors had thought the same of themselves for centuries!)

Defender of the Church

Charles took seriously his mission to "internally strengthen the church." Indeed, within his kingdom he was far more influential in church affairs than was the pope.

Charles appointed and deposed bishops, directed a revision of the text of the Bible, instituted changes to the liturgy, set rules for life in the monasteries, and sent investigators to dismiss priests with insufficient learning or piety. He had his deacon, Paul, publish a collection of homilies for use throughout the kingdom, instructing him to "peruse the writings of the Catholic fathers and, as in a flowery meadow, pick the choicest blooms and weave a single garland of all that can be put to use."

Charles also took an active interest in the two main religious controversies of his era, adoptionism (which held that Jesus was not "God from God" but was adopted as God's son during his lifetime) and iconoclasm (which condemns icons as idolatry). In his reforms, Charles showed that, like Constantine, he believed he was overlord of the church.

Education was also carefully tended. The partially illiterate Charles believed that success in his political and religious reforms depended on learning: "though doing right is better than knowledge, knowledge comes before doing." Charles was a patron of scholars, creating a school for his many children in the palace and accumulating an impressive library. The only copy of many classical texts we have today came from the pens of monks he set to work. He required each cathedral and monastery to set up a

school and compelled the children of nobles to attend (who might otherwise have considered this beneath them).

Charles's government helped set the feudal system deeply in place. His armies were made of nobles, bound to him by oaths and granted tracts of land to support themselves and their soldiers. He published his laws in "capitularies," and sent them throughout the realm by *missi dominici*, pairs of inspectors who made sure his orders were obeyed in castles and churches.

This energetic political, cultural, and religious reform, is today known as the Carolingian Renaissance and is one reason Charles was given the appellation, "Great," in Latin, Charlemagne.

http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/rulers/charlemagne.html?start=2

Cyril (827-869) and Methodius (820-882)
Translating the Gospel in Eastern Europe
Jennifer Hevelone-Harper

Missionaries to Eastern Europe had to cope with political barriers long before the Iron Curtain was established. The ninth-century Prince Ratislav of Moravia was very intrigued by Christianity. He ruled a region inhabited by Slavs that included much of the modern-day Czech Republic and Slovakia. He was concerned that if he welcomed missionaries from the neighboring Christian kingdom of the Franks, it might give powerful Frankish rulers an opportunity to annex his kingdom. He wanted Christianity with no political strings attached. So he wrote seeking missionaries from distant Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire and the protector of Christianity in the East, entreating, "We have not a teacher who would explain to us in our language the true Christian faith."

Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, chose two brothers for the job: Constantine, who would later adopt the name Cyril when he became a monk, and Methodius. Photius chose his ambassadors well. Cyril and Methodius had grown up in Thessaloniki and spoke a Slavic dialect as well as Greek. They were well educated; Cyril had served as the librarian at the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, while Methodius had been a governor of a Slavic region of the Empire. Together the brothers had gained experience representing Byzantium to its neighbors, debating the merits of Christianity on diplomatic missions to the Khazars and Arabs.

A new alphabet

Cyril had earned the nickname "The Philosopher" for his well-known love of wisdom. When an imperial officer once asked him to define philosophy, he replied that it was "the knowledge of matters of God and man, to what extent man can approach God and how, through virtue, it teaches man to be in the image and likeness of the Creator."

Initially Cyril was reluctant to accept the mission to Moravia, because the Moravians had no written script for their language. The emperor encouraged him to pray about the matter, and with God's help Cyril created a script for the Slavic language. Based upon the Greek and Hebrew alphabets, the Glagolitic alphabet originally contained 43 letters. In later centuries, this script was simplified and eventually called the Cyrillic alphabet after its inventor. Cyril and Methodius used their new alphabet to adapt the Moravians' oral language into a written language, Old Church Slavonic, to be used for both worship and literature. Orthodox Christians in Eastern Europe continue to worship in versions of this ancient language today, and the Cyrillic alphabet is used for many modern Eastern European languages, including Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Serbian.

Cyril translated the New Testament into the Moravians' own language, sharing Christ and also laying the foundation for written literature in Eastern Europe. Cyril recognized that the Bible was a gift from God and therefore emphasized that a translator must strive for the highest possible degree of accuracy in order to preserve the true meaning

of the text. But he also approached the task of translation as a poet, delighting in the beauty of biblical language and imagery.

The language of worship

After three years of teaching the gospel in Moravia, Cyril and Methodius set out for Rome with the newly translated Slavic Scriptures and young Moravian disciples to be ordained as clergy. They knew that the young church in Moravia would ultimately need good relations with its nearer neighbor Rome as well as the more distant Constantinople.

As they passed through Venice on their way to Rome, they encountered opposition from Roman Catholic church leaders. The powerful Franks had already complained to the pope about the missionary efforts of the two brothers. How dare they allow Moravian Christians to worship in Slavic rather than in Latin? There were only three languages holy enough to be used for prayer: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Cyril's opponents found a biblical basis for their position, arguing that "King of the Jews" had been inscribed on Christ's cross in these three languages.

Cyril was quick to point out the irony of this position, which gave authority to the one who ordered Christ's execution. Dubbing his opponents the "Pilatists," Cyril chastised them: "Falls not God's rain upon all equally? And shines not the sun also upon all? And breathe we not all air in the same way? Are you not ashamed to mention only three tongues, and to command all other nations and tribes to be blind and deaf?" All people had the right to worship God in their native tongue.

Cyril was well received by Pope Adrian II, who gave his blessing to the brothers' work and permitted the worship to continue in Slavic. The pope commanded that the young Moravian disciples be ordained and celebrate the liturgy in Slavic at St. Peter's basilica and many other churches in Rome.

Expelled, but not stopped

After Cyril died in Rome in 868, Methodius continued their work in Moravia, translating the Old Testament into Slavic; however, he repeatedly ran into political obstacles. His enemies included the successor of Prince Ratislav and Frankish church officials, who attempted to expel him. Methodius spent two and a half years in prison. His commitment to teaching Christianity to the Moravians in their own Slavic tongue even caused him to be summoned to Rome on charges of heresy. The new pope John VII was convinced by Methodius's arguments and granted him permission to continue his work in Moravia.

After Methodius's death in 885, however, his followers were expelled from Moravia. They took the Slavic Scriptures to Bulgaria, where King Boris, who had only recently converted to Christianity, joyfully welcomed them. While successive popes in Rome adopted a Latin-only policy for Christian worship, the new Slavic church flourished in

Bulgaria. This set the stage for the spread of Christianity throughout Eastern Europe and Russia.

The legacy of Cyril and Methodius—that people everywhere should be encouraged to worship God and read the Bible freely in their native tongue—continues to be a central pillar of the modern missionary movement. No one people group can claim to own the gospel. Christianity is a living faith that interacts fruitfully with diverse cultures, as we witness in the churches of the Global South today.

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http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/bytopic/missionsworldchristianity/cyrilandmethodius.html?start=1

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

988 Vladimir Adopts Christianity

The pagan prince of Kievan Rus' embraced a new faith, leading to the Christianization of the Ukrainian, Russian, and Byelorussian peoples.

In 1988 the Christian world celebrated the thousand-year anniversary of Christianity in Russia. Although 988 was indeed a pivotal year for Russian Christians, it isn't quite accurate to describe it as the birth year of Christianity there.

Christianity had, in fact, penetrated "Russia" by the early 900s, when at least one church had been built in the ancient city of Kiev. In the 950s, Olga, the grandmother of Vladimir, was baptized. She asked German king Otto I to send missionaries to her country, but apparently they met little success.

Olga's grandson Vladimir practiced the old religion. He built a number of pagan temples and was renowned for his cruelty and treachery. Vladimir had eight hundred concubines and several wives, and he spent his non-warring time in hunting and feasting. He hardly seemed the person to spread Christianity among the Ukrainians.

Shopping for a Church

Vladimir apparently wanted to unite the people under one religion, so around 988 he sent envoys to examine the major religions. The options? Islam, Judaism, the Catholic Christianity of Western Europe, and the Orthodox Christianity of Eastern Europe (though as yet, there was no official break between the Orthodox and Catholic Christians).

The story of Vladimir's choosing Orthodox Christianity is part legend, part fact. According to the tradition, Vladimir didn't like the dietary restrictions of Islam and Judaism. Catholic Christianity was all right, but what impressed the grand prince was the dazzling worship his ambassadors described seeing in the great Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you. Only we know that God dwells there among men, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. We cannot forget that beauty."

So Vladimir opted for Orthodoxy because of its beautiful worship. The name of Vladimir's chosen religion was, in fact, ***Pravoslavie***, a word which meant "true worship" or "right glory." Orthodoxy was also the religion of the most powerful, wealthy, and civilized of Russia's border nations, the Byzantine Empire. And if Vladimir was impressed by Orthodoxy's beauty, he also was impressed by another beauty: Anna, sister of Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine, who offered her to Vladimir as a bride with the condition that he be baptized.

In 988 Vladimir was baptized. In 989 he married Anna. Neither act was a sign that he was submitting to the authority—religious or political—of the Byzantine Empire. Though it adopted the Byzantine religion, the "Russian" church has always been independent.

Forging a National Church

Significant for church history, Vladimir then ordered all the inhabitants of Kiev to appear at the Dnieper River for baptism or be considered enemies of the kingdom. This doesn't mean that the Slavic nation

became a Christian society overnight. But with the help of monks, always a prime force in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the new religion began to make its influence felt.

As for Vladimir himself, his lifestyle was clearly affected. When he married Anna, he put away his five former wives. Not only did he build churches, he also destroyed idols, abolished the death penalty, protected the poor, established schools, and managed to live in peace with neighboring nations. On his deathbed he gave all his possessions to the poor.

Centuries later, when Moscow, not Kiev, was the capital of Russia, Russian Orthodoxy had become such a force that Moscow considered itself the Third Rome, the new capital of a Christian empire. Vladimir didn't know it, but by embracing Christianity he was paving the way for a Russian republic described by one writer as "among the 'most Christian' nations in the world—a land with a rich, age-old history of churches and monasteries, the wellspring of numerous revered saints and martyrs, with a cherished and abundant legacy of sacred music, iconography, and spiritual literature."

Yet the Russian Orthodox Church became so closely aligned with the tsarist regimes that it was largely unprepared for the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Since then, the church has suffered greatly, but it continues to survive. The tale of the church that traces its roots to Prince Vladimir is not yet finished.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

1054 The East-West Schism

Long-standing differences between Western and Eastern Christians finally caused a definitive break, and Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox still remain separate.

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On Saturday, July 16, 1054, as afternoon prayers were about to begin, Cardinal Humbert, legate of Pope Leo IX, strode into the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia, right up to the main altar, and placed on it a parchment that declared the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, to be excommunicated. He then marched out of the church, shook its dust from his feet, and left the city. A week later the patriarch solemnly condemned the cardinal.

Centuries later, this dramatic incident was thought to mark the beginning of the schism between the Latin and the Greek churches, a division that still separates Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox (Greek, Russian, and other). Today, however, no serious scholar maintains that the schism began in 1054. The process leading to the definitive break was much more complicated, and no single cause or event can be said to have precipitated it.

Immediate Causes of the Break

In 1048 a French bishop was elected as Pope Leo IX. He and the clerics who accompanied him to Rome were intent on reforming the papacy and the entire church. Five years earlier in Constantinople, the rigid and ambitious Michael Cerularius was named patriarch.

Problems arose in Southern Italy (then under Byzantine rule) in the 1040s, when Norman warriors conquered the region and replaced Greek [Eastern] bishops with Latin [Western] ones. People were confused, and they argued about the proper form of the liturgy and other external matters. Differences over clerical marriage, the bread used for the Eucharist, days of fasting, and other usages assumed an unprecedented importance.

When Cerularius heard that the Normans were forbidding Greek customs in Southern Italy, he retaliated, in 1052, by closing the Latin churches in Constantinople. He then induced bishop Leo of Ochrid to compose an attack on the Latin use of unleavened bread and other practices. In response to this provocative treatise, Pope Leo sent his chief adviser, Humbert, a tactless and narrow-minded man with a strong sense of papal authority, to Constantinople to deal with the problem directly.

On arriving in the imperial city in April 1054, Humbert launched into a vicious criticism of Cerularius and his supporters. But the patriarch ignored the papal legate, and an angry Humbert stalked into Hagia Sophia and placed on the altar the bull of excommunication. He returned to Rome convinced he had gained a victory for the Holy See.

Dramatic though they were, the events of 1054 were not recorded by the chroniclers of the time and were quickly forgotten. Negotiations between the pope and the Byzantine emperor continued, especially in the last two decades of the century, as the Byzantines sought aid against the invading Turks. In 1095, to provide such help, Pope Urban II proclaimed the Crusades; certainly there was no schism between the churches at that time. Despite episodes of tension and conflict, Eastern and Western Christians lived and worshiped together.

In the latter half of the twelfth century, however, friction between the groups increased, caused not so much by religious differences as by political and cultural ones. Violent anti-Latin riots erupted in Constantinople in 1182, and in 1204 Western knights brutally ravaged Constantinople itself. The tension accelerated, and by 1234, when Greek and Latin churchmen met to discuss their differences, it was obvious they represented different churches.

Underlying Causes of the Break

What caused the schism? It was not the excommunications of 1054; not differences in theology, discipline, or liturgy; not political or military conflicts. These may have disposed the churches to draw apart, as did prejudice, misunderstanding, arrogance, and plain stupidity. More fundamental, perhaps, was the way each church came to perceive itself.

The eleventh-century reform in the Western Church called for the strengthening of papal authority, which caused the church to become more autocratic and centralized. Basing his claims on his succession from St. Peter, the pope asserted his direct jurisdiction over the entire church, East as well as West.

The Byzantines, on the other hand, viewed their church in the context of the imperial system; their sources of law and unity were the ecumenical councils and the emperor, whom God had placed over all things, spiritual and temporal. They believed that the Eastern churches had always enjoyed autonomy of governance, and they rejected papal claims to absolute rule. But neither side was really listening to the other.

In addition, since the ninth century, theological controversy had focused on the procession of the Holy Spirit. In the life of the Trinity, does the Spirit proceed from the Father only, or from the Father ***and*** from the Son (***Filioque*** in Latin)? The Western church, concerned about resurgent Arianism, had, almost inadvertently, added the word to the Nicene Creed, claiming that it made more precise a teaching already in the creed. The Greeks objected to the unilateral addition to the creed, and they strongly disagreed with the theological proposition involved, which seemed to them to diminish the individual properties of the three Persons in the Trinity. In 1439 Greek and Latin theologians at the Council of Florence, after debating the issue for over a year, arrived at a compromise that, while reasonable, has not proven fully satisfactory.

After the Byzantine Empire fell in 1453, the Eastern church lived on under Turkish rule and then in various nations. Millions of Orthodox Christians in those lands are still separated from the millions of Christians adhering to Rome. Today greater efforts are made to address the issues, but neither side seems willing to make the necessary concessions. As a result, Christians who share a common belief and accept Jesus as head of the church, feel that they cannot share his Eucharist.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 54: Eastern Orthodoxy

What the Orthodox Believe

Four key differences between the Orthodox and Protestants.

Daniel B. Clendenin

Most Americans think of religion in terms of the "Big Three"—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. But the Orthodox? Who are they? Like Protestants, they're not one monolith with uniform beliefs. On the other hand, there are distinctives that set them apart from Protestants.

Daniel Clendenin, on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Stanford University, has studied those distinctives, especially in their Russian Orthodox form. He has set them down in detail in Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective ***(Baker, 1994), and here in summary.***

Orthodoxy has suffered from cultural invisibility in America. It simply does not register on most of our cultural radar screens. Some confuse it with Catholicism. But Orthodoxy is distinct from Catholicism and enjoys a unique history and theology. The Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (d. 1958) once referred to the "dogmatic dissimilarity" between the Christian East and West.

What did Lossky mean? Let me summarize four ways in which faithful Christians, Orthodox and Protestant, have each tended to do theology differently.

Praising the Unknowable

During my first semester as a visiting professor at Moscow State University (1991-1992), I taught a seminar on C. S. Lewis's ***Mere Christianity***. The book had been translated into Russian, and its notable influence in the lives of many Western Christians made it a sure bet, I thought, to have a significant spiritual and intellectual impact. I could not have been more wrong.

Toward the end of the term, one student complained that Lewis was "too logical and rational." A year later in another seminar on Lewis's ***The Problem of Pain***, a student made a similar comment: "I do not like Lewis's position that we must use logic to discuss the question of evil. Problems relating to God transcend human logic." These remarks point to a fundamental difference between the theologies of the Orthodox and Protestants.

In one of the most important texts of Orthodoxy, ***Exposition of the Orthodox Faith***, John of Damascus (655-749) observed, "It is plain, then, that there is a God. But what he is in his essence and nature is absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable. ... All that is comprehensible about him is his incomprehensibility." This is a fine example of what has been called apophatic theology (from the Greek ***apophasis*** or "denial"). Apophatic theology tries to describe what God is not. For example, the theologian who says "God is not finite; he is not limited in time or space" is practicing apophatic theology.

Lossky says apophaticism is "the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church." He once defined it as "the breakdown of human thought before the radical transcendence of God ... a prostration before the living God, radically ungrasp-able, unobjectifiable, and

unknowable."

In Orthodoxy this incomprehensible mystery of God is a cause for praise and celebration, and theology is an extension of spirituality or worship. The aphorism of Evagrius of Pontus (346-399) expresses this nicely: only the one who prays is truly a theologian, for the true theo-logian prays truly.

By way of contrast, for Protestants the mystery of God is often a cause for analysis and explanation. We tend to be uncomfortable with mystery and are even trained to expunge it by finding answers. As heirs of the European Enlightenment, we believe that all truth claims, including theological propositions, must pass the test administered at the bar of reason.

One thinks, for example, of the influential legacy of René Descartes (1596-1650), who attempted to ground all thinking in "methodical doubt" and to accept nothing as true unless he perceived it as clear, distinct, indubitable, and certain.

In the words of the contemporary German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg: "Every theological statement must prove itself on the field of reason and can no longer be argued on the basis of unquestioned presuppositions of faith." In this Western intellectual scheme, theology is best understood as a form of knowledge or even a "science."

At the risk of exaggeration, we might say that in the West, theology is done with books in the library; in the Orthodox East, theology is done with liturgy in the sanctuary.

Theology in color

In his book ***The Illuminating Icon***, Anthony Ugolnik points to two conversion stories to illustrate another basic difference. In the ***Russian Primary Chronicle*** (twelfth century), the story is told of Prince Vladimir of Kiev: he embraced Orthodoxy (in 988) after his emissaries described to him the liturgical beauty of worship they experienced in the Orthodox Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. By way of contrast, Augustine (354-430), in his ***Confessions***, recounts how he heard the voice of a child telling him to "take up and read" a Bible that lay open at Romans 13:13. The contrasting conversions signal a key difference: in the Orthodox East, aesthetics play a major role in theology; the West prefers to work primarily with texts.

One can sense this difference simply by entering an Orthodox church: icons and frescoes cover virtually every square inch of the walls. The priest is resplendent in his vestments; his sonorous voice chants the liturgy. Bells chime, candles flicker, and incense fills the air.

Icons epitomize all this. Former librarian of the Library of Congress and Russian scholar James Billington once referred to icons as "the most revered form of theological expression" in early Russian Orthodoxy. Orthodox theology, he said, tends to "crystallize in images rather than in ideas." Icons are thus a "theology in color," which is why when an Orthodox priest was once asked why he did not do more doctrinal teaching in his church, he responded, "Icons teach us all we need to know."

Protestantism, on the other hand, insists upon the written word. During the Reformation, the spoken sermon gradually replaced the Catholic Eucharist as the defining moment of the liturgy for Protestants. John Calvin (1509-1564) said, "Images cannot stand in the place of books," and he whitewashed the walls of Reformed churches in Geneva. According to the Puritan John Foxe (1516-1587), "God conducted the Reformation not by the sword, but by printing, writing, and reading."

No wonder that the Orthodox Alexei Khomiakov (d. 1860) once complained that in Protestantism "a scholar has taken the place of the priest." Likewise, the Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov (d. 1944) once described Protestant Christianity as a "professorial" religion in which the central figure is the

scholar-professor.

Away with *sola scriptura*

When Martin Luther burned the books of Catholic canon law at the Elster Gate of Wittenberg on December 10, 1520, he did so to dramatize a point that has become fundamental to Protestant identity: Scripture has a unique and normative value, and whatever value "tradition" has, it is secondary and derivative. Indeed, Luther wrote, "What else do I contend for but to bring everyone to an understanding of the difference between the divine Scripture and human teaching or custom, so that a Christian may not take the one for the other and exchange gold for straw, silver for stubble, wood for precious stones?"

Hence the great watchwords of the Reformation—***sola scriptura***! This does not mean Protestants neglect tradition, only that tradition is submitted to the higher authority of the Bible.

Furthermore, Protestants insist that God speaks to the reader of the Bible in a direct manner rather than being mediated by the church. Just as the Reformers placed Scripture above tradition, they placed the Scriptures above the church. It was the Word of God that gave birth to the church, Calvin insisted, and not the other way around.

Most Orthodox believers understand things differently. According to the late Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff (d. 1992), "The Christian faith and experience can in no way be compatible with the notion of ***sola scriptura***" and the rejection of all ecclesiastical authority except Scripture. This elevation of the Bible above the church, the consequence of which is private interpretation, George Florovsky (d. 1979) once called "the sin of the Reformation."

Positively, Orthodoxy believes that the Spirit of God speaks to his people through apostolic tradition. This tradition is expressed through Scripture, to be sure, but also through the seven ecumenical councils, and to a lesser degree, the church fathers, liturgy, canon law, and icons.

Furthermore, contrary to Calvin, the Orthodox note that the church existed some 300 years before the ecumenical councils and the formation of the scriptural canon. The Reformed idea of "Scripture alone" seems privatistic (allowing each person to interpret truth on his or her own) and therefore dangerous. By way of contrast, converts to Orthodoxy vow to "accept and understand Holy Scripture in accordance with the interpretation which was and is held by the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East, our Mother."

Becoming like God

The central issue raised by the Reformation was how a person could stand just before a holy God—How can I be saved? For traditional Protestants, the answer to this question is expressed in Paul's doctrine of "justification by faith alone." The perfect righteousness of Christ is credited to me by faith alone and not by any work I do. Because of Christ's righteousness, God declares me just. Calvin called this doctrine "the hinge upon which true religion turns." According to Luther, Christianity stands or falls with this doctrine.

The background for justification is distinctly legal or forensic. Having offended the majesty and honor of God, a just penalty must be paid. Calvin describes justification by faith just so: "Just as a man, deemed innocent by an impartial judge, is said to be justified, so a sinner is said to be justified by God when he asserts His righteousness."

It is fascinating to observe the total absence of the doctrine of justification by faith in large segments of

Orthodox history and theology. Instead, the idea of ***theosis*** or "deification" takes center stage. The startling aphorism—attributed to many early church fathers, including the champion of trinitarianism, Athanasius—summed it up well: "God became man so that men might become gods."

In fact, ***theosis*** enjoys the support of Scripture, as in 2 Peter 1:4: "[God] has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature . ..." Put another way, the Son of God ***descended*** and became a man, that we humans might ***ascend*** and become like Christ. The legal framework for understanding the work of Christ is played down and our mystical union with God is emphasized.

But what does it mean to "become God"? First, Orthodoxy categorically repudiates any hint of pantheism; theosis does not mean the essence of our human nature is lost. Rather, theosis speaks to believers' real, genuine, and mystical union with God whereby we become more and more like Christ and move from corruption to immortality. As we avail ourselves of God's grace and live lives of spiritual vigilance, we hope for what Maximus the Confessor (580-662) described as the "glorious attainment of likeness to God, insofar as this is possible with man."

As Lossky observed, there is indeed a "dogmatic dissimilarity" between Christian thinkers in the East and West. I for one am thoroughly Protestant, but I am grateful to God for what I can learn from the Orthodox about our common pilgrimage of faith.

2 THE QUEST FOR ORDER: MEDIEVAL CHRISTENDOM

PROGRAM SCRIPT

Certain events in human history stand out in bold relief against all others. These are defining moments which summarize the essence of an entire age, like the storming of the Bastille in 1789 or the fall of the Berlin Wall in our own century.

Such an event took place in the year 410, when the city of Rome was sacked and burned by a Gothic chieftain named Alaric. For centuries, Rome had stood as a symbol of stability and continuity; the "eternal city" it was called. Now, Rome had been ravaged by barbarian soldiers. In faraway Palestine, in the little town of Bethlehem St. Jerome received the news of the fall of Rome with horror and shock. He wept and asked, "If Rome can perish, what then is safe?"

The answer came from St. Augustine, who replied to Jerome's lament: "You are surprised that the world is losing its grip? That the world is grown old? Do not fear; thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle."

For Augustine, the wellspring of youth was Christianity. It could not help but persist and grow, rising above spent empires and cultures. As soon as Augustine heard of the fall of Rome, he began to write his *magnum opus, The City of God.* It was the first philosophy of history written by a Christian author. The city of God, he said, cannot be equated with any human empire or kingdom, however glorious or powerful.

Jesus had promised that the gates of hell would never prevail against the church. The church is the Body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space. It belongs to the future, as well as to the past and the present. More than anyone else, it was Augustine who provided the blueprint for the millennium of Christian history which we know as the "Middle Ages."

THE MIDDLE AGES

But what are the Middle Ages? When did they begin and end? Why should Christians be concerned about them today?

The Middle Ages are the intervening centuries between the death of St. Augustine in 430 and the birth of Martin Luther in 1483. In popular imagination, the Middle Ages have been glamorized and romanticized. We think of knights in shining armor, the crusaders' quest for the holy grail, King Arthur, Camelot, and all that. But, in fact, the Middle Ages were marked by violence and great suffering in what was to become Europe.

Jerome had reason to weep at the fall of Rome. For the Goths were succeed-

ed by the Lombards, the Franks, and the Vandals, from which we get our modern word "vandalism." Still later, the Vikings from Scandinavia would reek their own distinctive brand of havoc on the outposts of Christian civilization.

A still more sinister force arose from the deserts of Arabia as the armed forces of the prophet Muhammad (also spelled "Mohammed"), fanned out across the Mediterranean in a *blitzkrieg*-like holy war, or *jihad,* capturing Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Carthage. They advanced even into the heart of Europe, until they were stopped by Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charlemagne, at the famous battle of Poitiers, in 732.

It was not without reason that this period of history would later be called "The Dark Ages." Yet, in the thickest darkness, the light of the Gospel was never completely extinguished.

Protestant and evangelical Christians are apt to think that there were few, if any, true believers during this age of darkness and disintegration. But we should remember that we are all like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. We may be able to see further than they, but without their steadfastness, we could see nothing at all.

For example, the classics of Greece and Rome, not to mention the writings of the early church fathers, have come down to us in manuscripts painstakingly copied letter by letter in the monasteries and cathedral schools of medieval Europe. In addition to this, there is an unbroken tradition of worship and prayer, contemplation and meditation, the kind of spirituality embodied so fully in a figure like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, whom both Luther and Calvin cited frequently and with great favor.

In the midst of the oppression and bloodshed of his age (in which, it must be said, he himself played a part), Saint Bernard could describe the transcendent reality of divine love so beautifully that it still speaks across the centuries to our own hearts today:

> What value has there been in all this work? This, I think: We have learned that every soul — although burdened with sins, afflicted with sorrow — may, without fear, enter a bond of society with God and may, without alarm, take up with the King of angels a sweet yoke of love.

"A sweet yoke of love," "a bond of society with God" — these were the ideals which shaped the most characteristic institutions of the Middle Ages: the great Gothic cathedrals, the universities, and the monasteries.

THE "WAVE" OF CHURCH-BUILDING

From the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries, all of Christendom, it seemed, peasants and lords, artisans and scholars, bishops and kings, con-

tributed to a remarkable wave of church-building. As one contemporary put it, "It was as if the whole earth had cast off her old age and were clothing herself everywhere in a white garment of churches."

The stately form of the Romanesque churches had given way to the soaring spires and flying buttress of the Gothic cathedrals. The most amazing masterpiece of all was, and remains, the majestic cathedral at Chartres, whose frescoes and friezes tell the history of salvation, while the dazzling stained-glass windows turn the sanctuary and nave into an ecstasy of color and light.

For medieval men and women, life was a torturous journey up the ladder from earth to heaven. The demons were always eager to ensnare and capture lost souls in their eternal war against humanity. The way to heaven was beset by infernal dangers while pilgrims on the way were sustained by the prayers of the monks on earth and the exalted saints in heaven.

It was this theology which lay behind the rosary, relics, pilgrimages, indulgences, and many other practices of late medieval Catholicism, against which the reformers of the sixteenth century would protest in the name of God's unmerited love and grace.

What the Gothic cathedrals displayed so magnificently in stone and stained-glass, the great scholastic masters of the thirteenth century set forth, with equal clarity, in their famous *summae* or systematic summaries of Christian theology.

THOMAS AQUINAS

The rediscovery of the Greek philosopher Aristotle gave a new basis for theology in the thought of Albert the Great and his brilliant student, Thomas Aquinas. While revelation and reason are distinct, Thomas argued, they are not in opposition. It is the task of Christian theology to show that faith is in harmony with reason. He gave his life to building, stone by stone, a Gothic cathedral of Christian thought.

It is significant that Thomas was never able to complete his great masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*. Near the end of his life, he experienced a vision of God, a blaze of heavenly light so overwhelming that he was not able to describe it. After this experience, he put down his pen and never wrote another word. All that I have written, he said, now seems to me like straw.

Thus, Thomas Aquinas died in 1274, his life work incomplete. Fifty years later, he was canonized by Pope John XXII. Since then, his theology has come to be regarded as normative for the Roman Catholic tradition. However, two centuries before Thomas' death, the father of scholasticism, Saint Anselm, expressed, in the form of a prayer, that yearning for God which is at the heart of all true theology and spirituality: "Oh Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek Thee, where and how to find Thee. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand."

2

THE QUEST FOR ORDER: MEDIEVAL CHRISTENDOM

THE MONASTIC TRADITION

Anselm was a monk, and he combined in his prayer and his theology that love of learning and desire for God, which was the wellspring of the monastic tradition. The rule of Saint Benedict had provided a blueprint for a well-ordered Christian community, whose basic motto was *ora et labora* ("pray and work").

The work of Benedictine monks involved physical labor — clearing the forests, tilling the soil — but it also involved the intellectual labor of the *scriptorium,* as ancient manuscripts were copied and biblical texts studied and commented upon in the annual cycle of the Christian year. At the heart of this great enterprise was the priority of Christian worship, the praying of the Psalms, and the rich harmony of Gregorian chant.

Again and again, throughout the medieval centuries, monastic reformers arose to call their fellow monks back to the purity and simplicity of Saint Benedict's rule.

In the thirteenth century, however, the rise of the Mendicant orders, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, introduced something radically new and different into the religious life of the Middle Ages. The word "mendicant" means "beggar," and it points to the fact that these new religious orders were free to move into the new towns and cities of Europe, begging for their food, ministering to all the needy in Jesus' name.

The Benedictine ideal had been *stabilitas* ("stability"), a tract of land, a single place where one lived, prayed, and died. The ideal of the Franciscans and Dominicans was *mobilitas* ("mobility"). Like John Wesley in a later age, their parish was the world, especially the universities where, in the medieval equivalent of a great Christian student movement, they attracted disciples from all walks of life.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Of the mendicant reformers, the one who stands out above all others, is Francis of Assisi. His given name was Giovanni. He was later called Francesca because of his mother's connection with France. His father was Pietro Bernadone, a rich cloth merchant in the Italian city of Assisi. The two ideals of his youth were the troubadour and the knight. The picture which emerges from his early biographers is that of an over-indulged, spoiled-brat type. He was "a master of revels," a playboy who spent much of his time drinking, joking, and squandering any money he could get his hands on.

At the age of 20, he got his chance to realize his dreams of glory, and went off to war. In the heat of battle, he was taken prisoner and held for one year by the enemy. Out of this experience, followed by a severe illness, Francis came to see the vanity of his former life. His conversion coincided with his identification with the helpless, the poor, and the sick. During a pilgrimage to Rome, he was confronted with hundreds of beggars who roamed the city looking for bread. In an impulsive gesture, he exchanged his fine clothes for beggars' rags and walked the streets of Rome, begging with them.

On another occasion, while riding one day near Assisi, he came across a leper in the road. He dismounted and gave the leper a gift of money, whereupon the leper seized his hand and kissed it, exposing Francis to his dreadful disease. Francis determined to live with the lepers and to serve them as Jesus would have done.

Francis' future ministry was determined by two other events. One of these occurred while he was praying in an old dilapidated chapel. He heard, he said, the voice of Christ from the crucifix in the church saying, "My house is being destroyed; go, therefore, and repair it for me." Francis took this as a divine calling to rebuild the church.

The second event occurred when he appealed to his father for financial support. His father, however, was not sympathetic to his son's radical ideas and hailed him before the bishop of Assisi for discipline. In an act of defiance before the bishop, Francis declared:

> Up to this day I have called Pietro Bernidone father. But now I desire to serve God and to say nothing else than, "Our Father which art in heaven." Not only money, but everything that can be called his, I will return to my father, even the clothes he has given me.

Immediately, Francis stripped himself naked and ran out of the church to take up a life of abject poverty and apostolic simplicity. He was, as a contemporary writer put it, "a naked man following a naked Christ."

Eventually, Francis gathered around him a company of like-minded disciples, who agreed to live with him a life of literal, deliberate imitation of the way of Christ and His apostles.

Francis, of course, drew opposition from the leaders of the church. Many of them, like the bishop of Assisi, were, themselves, deeply enmeshed in the futile structures of medieval society. Our modern game of chess derives from this historical period. In that game, it is no accident that the figure of the bishop serves the interest of the king and queen, while he himself lords it over many pawns.

Francis set forth a rule and a way of life which challenged this entire system. His movement may well have been driven underground and declared heretical, as that of Peter Waldo had been a generation before. However, when Francis presented his order to Pope Innocent III at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, this most powerful of all medieval popes made an extraordinary gesture. He bowed prostrate before the bare-footed beggar from Assisi and kissed his feet in a public act of devotion.

Scholars still debate whether Innocent III acted out of genuine spiritual concern or simply as a shrewd politician, trying to ward off a potential problem. In any event, in that single dramatic act, we have two contrasting figures of Jesus Christ:

- Innocent, arrayed in his purple regalia and papal tiara, *vicarus Christi* — the vicar of Christ on earth, the Christ of power and glory, resplendent in wealth and prestige; and, on the other hand,

- Francis, also a vicar of Christ — not the exalted, glorified Christ, but the naked, suffering, crucified Christ. The Christ who came, not to be served, but to serve, and to offer His life on behalf of others.

It is no surprise that the Franciscan ideal was too pure, too unrealistic to survive the allurements of time and history. Soon after Francis' death in 1224, he who had renounced all property had a beautiful church building erected over the place of his birth! Still, the legacy of Francis, a saint beloved by Protestants and Catholics alike, is a reminder that Jesus' call to follow Him can break through any social barrier or ecclesiastical system.

We can still see the spirit of Francis living today in a figure like Mother Teresa. We can still join our prayer to his when we say, "Lord make me an instrument of Thy peace." And we can still lift our hearts to the Christ who calls us, no less than He did Francis, to see the world through the eyes of the Savior's love.

"REFORM IS NECESSARY!"

Francis was not the last medieval Christian to challenge the structures of the church. John Wycliffe in England, John Huss in Bohemia, Savanarola in Florence — these, and many others, all called for a reform of the church, in head and in members. As one contemporary theologian put it, "The whole world, the clergy, all Christian people, know that a reform of the church is both necessary and expedient. Heaven and the elements demand it. The very stones will soon be constrained to join in the cry."

The reform of the church would come, but with consequences that no one, from Augustine on, could have predicted.

If the Middle Ages began with the fall of Rome in 410, they can be fairly said to have concluded with the fall of another city in 1453. For a thousand years, Constantinople had withstood assault after assault. But on the eve of the Reformation, this great light in the East, the last outpost of classical Christian antiquity, succumbed to the forces of the Ottoman Turks. Hundreds of Greek scholars fled to the West, carrying with them precious manuscripts, relics of the Eastern saints, and a fresh knowledge of the language in which the New Testament was written. In 1516, Desiderius Erasmus published the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament in Basel, Switzerland. A few months later, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk in Wittenberg, Germany, was pouring over that same text, desperately seeking to discover the meaning of the Gospel of the grace of God. In all of these events, we can hear the death throes of the Middle Ages, and the birth pangs of the modern world.

Anselm
Reluctant bishop with a remarkable mind

"No one but one who is God-man can make the satisfaction by which man is saved."

In the Middle Ages, it was customary for bishops-elect to make a show of protest to signify their modesty. When Anselm, an Italian monk from Normandy, was chosen to become archbishop of Canterbury, he protested too. The episcopal staff had to be held against his clenched fist. But his refusal was sincere: for Anselm, becoming the archbishop meant less time for his studies. His instincts, in fact, have proved correct: Anselm is remembered today not merely as a great archbishop but as one of the most profound thinkers of the Middle Ages.

Pulled to higher office

The struggle between the scholarly life and that of high office began in Anselm's earliest years. His father, Gundulf, wanted to see him in politics and forbade him from entering the local abbey. When the abbot refused to accept the 15-year-old without his father's consent, Anselm prayed to become ill: he reasoned he could enter if he was in danger of death. He actually became seriously ill but was still refused admission.

After wandering Europe for years, looking to stretch his mind, Anselm settled at Bec, Normandy, to study under Lanfranc, a renowned scholar. Anselm felt here he could live the monastic life in obscurity, since the fame of Lanfranc would outshine his possible accomplishments.

But Anselm shined nonetheless. After three years, Lanfranc left the abbey to become archbishop of Canterbury, and Anselm replaced him as prior. He spent his time reading and reflecting on theological mysteries. Under his leadership, the monastery became famous for its scholastic excellence. When administrative duties interfered with his desired calling, he begged the local bishop to relieve him of some of his duties. Instead, the bishop told Anselm to prepare himself for higher office.

A proof of God

At Bec, Anselm made his first great intellectual contribution: he attempted to prove the existence of God. He set out his famous ontological argument in his Proslogion. God is "that which nothing greater can be thought," he argued. We cannot think of this entity as anything but existing because a god who exists is greater than one who merely is an idea. The argument, though contested almost as soon as it was written, has influenced philosophers even into the twentieth century.

Anselm also thought deeply on the relationship of faith and reason. He concluded that faith is the precondition of knowledge (*credo ut intelligam*, "I believe in order to understand"). He didn't despise reason; in fact he employed it in all his writings. He

simply believed knowledge cannot lead to faith, and knowledge gained outside of faith is untrustworthy.

Squaring off against the king

In 1066 the Normans invaded England, and William the Conqueror gave the monastery at Bec several tracts of English land. Following the invasion, Anselm was summoned across the channel three times, where he impressed the English clergy. When Lanfranc died in 1089, they pressed William II to appoint Anselm to the archbishopric (formally the prerogative of the pope, but in practice the archbishop of Canterbury was the king's appointee). Anselm was reluctant, as was William II for political reasons, and the position went unfilled for four years. Then, one day, the king fell seriously ill and, fearing hell, appointed Anselm against his repeated pleas.

Anselm immediately exerted pressure on the king: he refused to do anything priestly for William until the king restored lands to Canterbury, recognized the archbishop as supreme in spiritual matters, and pledged his allegiance to Pope Urban II (who was embroiled in a power struggle with England). The king, also called William Rufus, agreed, but reneged on his promises when he recovered from his illness. In fact, he would not even let Anselm visit Rome. When Rufus denied permission the third time, Anselm blessed him and left England anyway.

Productive in exile

Anselm no doubt felt relieved. He had hated his position at Canterbury. He had avoided getting involved in disputes and often became ill when he was required to arbitrate disagreements. On the other hand, if one of his monks drew him aside and asked a theological question, he at once became enthralled and, as he explained his answer, his spirits rose. So while in exile, he again begged the pope to relieve him, but the pope replied that he needed Anselm's theological mind.

While in exile, Anselm wrote *Why Did God Become Man?,* which became the most influential treatise on the atonement in the Middle Ages. He argued for the "satisfaction theory." Early theologians, like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, held to the "ransom theory": humankind was held captive to sin and death by Satan, at least until Christ paid the ransom through his death, and in the Resurrection, broke the power of Satan's chains. Anselm argued instead that it wasn't Satan who was owed something but God. In Adam, all human beings had sinned against divine holiness. Furthermore, being both finite and sinful, people were powerless to make proper restitution. That could only be accomplished by Christ: "No one but one who is God-man can make the satisfaction by which man is saved."

With the ascension of Henry I in 1100, Anselm was invited back to Canterbury. But when the king demanded homage from the bishops, Anselm refused and would not consecrate bishops who had done so. The controversy raged for six years, but Anselm eventually won.

For his last two years, he was able to study in relative peace. On his deathbed, Palm Sunday, 1107, Anselm told his monks he was ready to die, but before he did, he wanted to settle Augustine's question of the origin of the soul. "I do not know of anyone who will be able to do the work if I do not," he told them. But by Tuesday morning of Holy Week, he was dead.

http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/theologians/anselm.html

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 24: Bernard of Clairvaux, Medieval Reformer and Mystic

A 12th Century Man for All Seasons

The Life and Thought of Bernard of Clairvaux

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Bernard of Clairvaux is worthy of the title "a man for all seasons." His life was dogged by controversy and he fought for some issues that few today would wish to defend. Yet despite this he has in every generation had his admirers. As Jean Leclercq put it, "today, as in his own time, he enchants more readers than he exasperates."

In the 16th century he was a widely quoted figure, and both Catholics and Protestants were keen to claim his support. John Calvin saw him as the major witness to the truth in the Medieval Church between Gregory the Great (died 604) and the 16th century. Calvin was not alone in his admiration of Bernard. In the early years of the Reformation dozens of anthologies of writings of early Church fathers and medieval masters were published, by Catholics and Protestants alike. In these works the two most popular medieval authors, who appear in almost all of them, are Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux. The great monk of the 12th century, the theologian of love, the "honey-tongued doctor," has been admired by all manner of Christians now for almost 800 years.

Bernard was born in 1090 at the chateau of Fontaines, on the outskirts of Dijon in Burgundy (today, France). The chateau survives today and part of it has been converted into a chapel commemorating Bernard. His family belonged to the lesser nobility and Bernard would have received the upbringing proper to a young nobleman, training him for a life in the world. But this was not to be.

In 1112* [* Some recent scholarship has redated Bernards entry to Citeaux to the year 1113.] he entered the recently founded Abbey of Citeaux, the first abbey of the new Cistercian order. This was not one of the well-established and prestigious monasteries, but was a strict reforming monastery which had been founded in 1098 by one Robert of Molesme. By 1112 the abbot was an Englishman by the name of Stephen Harding, whose beautifully illustrated Bible is today in the municipal library at Dijon. Bernard did not arrive empty-handed but managed to bring with him a party of 30 recruits, including his two uncles and most of his brothers. In time, more of his family were to join the order.

Citeaux, Clairvaux, and Controversy

Three years later, Bernard was appointed abbot of a new monastery, the third offshoot from Citeaux. He set out with 12 monks to a remote valley where they founded the Monastery of Clairvaux. (The abbey at Clairvaux still survives, but was converted into a prison after the French Revolution. The cells once inhabited by monks are now inhabited by prisoners.)

Citeaux had been founded in opposition to what was felt to be the laxity of the Benedictine order, and Clairvaux was founded in the same spirit. The aim was to return to a strict observance of the ***Rule of Benedict***, including poverty and hard work. There was to be a stricter form of asceticism than that being practiced by the Benedictines.

At Clairvaux Bernard carried his reforming ideas to extremes, and in his early years this had

unfortunate consequences. His high standards proved to be too severe for the frail humanity of his monks. After a time they were unable to cope and Bernard had to slacken the reins. Furthermore, Bernard was stricter with himself than with others, with the result that his health was permanently damaged. In particular, he suffered from severe gastric problems and had ongoing problems with digestion. A place had to be provided for him to be sick during monastery services. Despite his poor health, however, Bernard achieved more in his lifetime than has been achieved by most other great men.

Citeaux was founded in protest to Benedictine compromise, and this brought controversy. Into this controversy Bernard entered wholeheartedly. One of his first works, written around 1124–1125, was his ***Apology***, addressed to Abbot William of St. Thierry, concerning the dispute between the Cistercians and the monks of Cluny. (The great monastery at Cluny was the center of the Benedictine community in that day.)

The Cistercians were accusing the Cluniacs of infringing the ***Rule***; the Cluniacs responded by accusing the Cistercians of unfair criticism. Bernard addressed the second charge first, admitting that there is the danger of spiritual pride. "There are people who go clad in tunics and have nothing to do with furs, who nevertheless are lacking in humility. Surely humility in furs is better than pride in tunics" (Apology 6:12). He then launches into a brilliant satirical attack on Cluniac luxury. In a famous passage he caricatures the lavish meals served at certain monasteries:

> Meanwhile course after course is brought in. Only meat is lacking and to compensate for this two huge servings of fish are given. You might have thought that the first was sufficient, but even the recollection of it vanishes once you have set to on the second. The cooks prepare everything with such skill and cunning that the four or five dishes already consumed are no hindrance to what is to follow and the appetite is not checked by satiety... The selection of dishes is so exciting that the stomach does not realize that it is being over-taxed. (9:20)

This was not his last writing concerning the Benedictines and the ***Rule of Benedict***. Some years later (1141–1144) he wrote another work, ***On Precept and Dispensation***, concerning the nature of obedience to the ***Rule***. This began as a response to some queries from two Benedictine monks and is, therefore, less polemical in tone. It concerns the status of the ***Rule of Benedict*** and the question of whether it may ever be broken.

In particular, what should the monk do if there arises a conflict between the Rule and the obedience which he has promised to his abbot? Bernard stresses that the authority of the abbot is derived from and dependent upon the ***Rule*** and also that the monk should obey his abbot. Bernard, despite his polemical attacks on the Benedictines, came to have an influence upon the order. Suger, abbot of the prestigious monastery of St. Denis in Paris, was touched by Bernard's words about luxury and adopted a more austere lifestyle for both himself and his monks.

Knights and Other Orders

Bernard also enjoyed a close and warm relationship with other religious orders, such as the Carthusians and the Premonstratensians. In particular he created the Rule for the new order of Knights Templar, and also, at some time between 1128 and 1136, wrote for them a devotional work ***In Praise of the New Knighthood***. The Templars were a religious order of knights sworn to defend the Holy Land, and to Christian devotion and morality—unlike that of most plundering crusaders.

After Bernard discusses this new order of knights in ***In Praise of the New Knighthood***, he considers the allegorical significance of various sites in the Holy Land that the Templars would be defending, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth. Most of the discussion is devoted to one site—the holy

sepulchre where Christ was buried. Bernard asks:

> "How do we know that Christ has really overcome death? Precisely in that he, who did not deserve it, underwent it. How could we be expected to pay a debt which he has already satisfied in our stead? He who has assumed the guilt of our sins while bestowing his justice upon us had himself paid our debt of death and restored us to life... But what kind of justice is this, you may say, that the innocent should die for the guilty? It is not justice, but mercy." (11.22ff)

Cistercian Growth

Under Bernard the monastery of Clairvaux grew rapidly and before long began to found its own daughter houses. The first of these, in 1118, was at Trois Fontaines. The second, in 1119, was at Fontenay. (Only the ruins of the chapel and a few other buildings survive at Trois Fontaines, but at Fontenay the buildings have fared better. They have now been lovingly restored, and Fontenay is the best preserved monastery of that period in the world today.)

In due course Bernard himself founded some 70 Cistercian monasteries. If one adds the further offshoots from these monasteries, there were by the time of Bernard's death almost 170 daughter, grand-daughter and great-grand-daughter abbeys of Clairvaux. It was thanks in large measure to Bernard that the order grew rapidly during the 12th century.

This rapid growth shows the success of the Cistercian order in its first century; however, this was also the cause of its decline. Citeaux had been founded as a rigorist protest against the laxity of contemporary Benedictine monasticism. But the outcome of such rapid growth was a new large and powerful order, and it proved impossible to maintain strict standards for long. In due course, the Cistercians became as lax as the Benedictines. Already in the year of Bernard's death decisions were made which weakened the commitment to poverty.

The Affairs of the World

Bernard went to Citeaux to flee the world, but here we encounter one of the profound contradictions in his life. He believed that the monk had left the world and turned his back on it, and also that the monk should stay put in his monastery. But in time Bernard became one of the most traveled and active leaders of the 12th-century Church. In 1130 Pope Honorius II died and was succeeded by two rival popes: Innocent II and Anacletus II. Europe divided over the issue.

Bernard came to the conclusion that the former was the better candidate and more committed to reform. He therefore threw his weight behind Innocent and fought hard for him, both by writing letters and by appearing in person to win over Anacletus's supporters.

Innocent's eventual victory was due in no small part to Bernard's support. This served to increase Bernard's influence at Rome and must have also helped to increase his appetite for this sort of involvement in the affairs of Europe.

Throughout his life Bernard protested his desire to turn his back on the world and his reluctance to be involved in worldly affairs. However, the frequency with which he intervened in such affairs, even when not invited to do so, shows that at least a part of him felt no such reluctance. The extent of his involvement can be seen from the recent critical edition of his ***Letters***, which contains no less than 547 letters addressed to many different people all over Europe.

Monasticism Versus Scholasticism

Another ambivalent aspect of Bernard's character can be seen in his relation to scholastic theology. In the so-called "dark ages" (c 500–1000), when western Europe was overrun by successive waves of barbarian invasions, theology was confined almost entirely to the monasteries, which offered an environment of relative stability. This ***monastic theology*** was produced in an atmosphere of commitment and devotion, within the framework of a life lived according to the monastic rule. It was a theology that fit the needs of everyday life. The goal was not the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but wisdom—personal growth in spirituality.

The approach taken by the monastics was one of contemplation and adoration. This was especially a theology by and for monks. But with the growing stability of western Europe from the 11th century, scholarship in general and theology in particular spread beyond the confines of the monastery to the cathedral school, and then to the university. This placed theology in a different context and endowed it with a different set of priorities. What emerged, the ***scholastic theology***, was based in the schools and took place, therefore, in a more "secular" environment, with a commitment to scholarship rather than to devotion. The goal was objective intellectual knowledge. The approach was one of questioning, disputation, and logical analysis, rather than prayer and meditation.

When did the scholastic approach begin? The first steps can be seen in Anselm of Canterbury, who died in 1109. He was a monk and in many ways remained in the monastic tradition, but he pioneered a more philosophical approach to theology. These beginnings were further developed by others, especially by Peter Abelard (1079–1142), the influential and controversial teacher of theology who lived in Paris in Bernard's day.

Abelard was possibly the most brilliant thinker of the 12th century, and was responsible for introducing a new approach to theology. Augustine, and Anselm after him, operated on the principle that the purpose of knowledge was to strengthen faith, not to question it; the pursuit of knowledge was "faith seeking understanding." Belief came first: "I believe ***in order to*** understand." Abelard turned this on its head, proposing instead the method of doubt. "It is by doubting that we come to enquire and by enquiring that we reach truth."

This was a dramatic reversal of the traditional approach, added to which Abelard also showed a fundamental lack of respect towards established authorities. This led him at least to question the traditional explanations of the death of Christ in terms of a ransom paid to either God or the devil. (Christ's death as a ransom to the devil was a popular medieval concept.) Instead, Abelard suggested that Christ died not to pay a penalty, but in order to show us God's love, and to win our affection.

Bernard Versus Abelard

How did Bernard react to scholastic theology? He has not inaptly been described as the last great representative of the earlier tradition of monastic theology. He is also well known as the opponent of Abelard who secured his condemnation. This is true, but it is not the whole story. One of Bernard's first works, ***On Grace and Free Will***, written about 1128, is a tightly argued discussion of the relationship between grace and free will, which could hold its own in the debates of the schools, and was indeed often quoted by 13th-century scholastic theologians, especially Franciscans. It exhibits a spirit somewhat different from Bernard's other works, and Luther was not totally wide of the mark when he drew a sharp contrast between the Bernard of this treatise and the Bernard of the sermons.

However, when it came to Abelard's teaching Bernard's position was clear. He saw it as a serious threat to the integrity of the gospel. In 1139 he wrote a lengthy letter to the pope (sometimes reckoned as one of his treatises) refuting Abelard. In it he combats much of Abelard's teaching, including his apparent reduction of the atonement to a mere demonstration of God's love.

> I was made a sinner by deriving my being from Adam; I am made just by being washed in the blood of Christ. Shall generation by a sinner be sufficient to condemn me and shall not the blood of Christ be sufficient to justify me? ... Such is the justice which man has obtained through the blood of the Redeemer. But this 'son of perdition' [Abelard] disdains and scoffs at it... [Abelard believes that Christ lived and died] for no other purpose than that he might teach men how to live by his words and example and point them by his passion and death to what limits their love should go. (6:16–7:17)

Bernard arranged for Abelard to be summoned to appear at a council at Sens in 1140, where his teaching was condemned. Abelard appealed to Rome, but the pope was Innocent II, who owed his very position in part to Bernard! The sentence was confirmed, and Abelard retired to the monastery of Cluny, where he died the following year.

Bernard's opposition to Abelard and to scholastic theology was not, however, his last word on the subject. Peter Lombard (died 1160), a disciple of Abelard, wrote ***Four Books of Sentences*** which became a standard theological textbook for the rest of the middle ages and beyond. In this he used methods similar to Abelard's, but with a reverence for traditional authorities which had always eluded Abelard. As a result Lombard even managed to win the support of Bernard.

Bernard's opposition was primarily directed against the abuses of scholastic theology. He felt that it was not an activity suitable for monks, but he did not deny that others might have a vocation in this area. However, Bernard was on occasions capable of giving the impression that the monastic life was the only safe way to heaven. One example of this is to be found in his passionate sermon to clerics, ***On Conversion***, preached in Paris in 1139–40, in which he urged them to forsake the world and be converted to the monastic life.

Bernard's opposition to heresy did not stop with Abelard. He also opposed another, but much more wily, scholastic theologian in the person of Gilbert, bishop of Poitiers. Gilbert was summoned to appear before a council at Reims in 1148, but, unlike Abelard, escaped with only a warning. Many felt that Bernard had shown an immoderate zeal against heresy and that he had attempted to exploit his close relationship with the pope in order to have Gilbert condemned.

Bernard also opposed two popular preachers, Peter de Bruys and Henry of Lausanne, who rejected the Catholic Church and formed their own "spiritual" church in the south of France. Another heretic opposed by Bernard was Arnald of Brescia, who taught that the clergy should be stripped of material wealth and that the pope had no jurisdiction outside of ecclesiastical matters.

Father to the Pope

In 1145 Bernard's authority was further enhanced when a former monk of Clairvaux, Bernardo Pignatelli, became pope Eugenius III. With his former pupil as the Roman Pontiff it was natural that Bernard's influence should increase. There is probably an element of self-satisfaction in Bernard's lament to Eugenius that "they say that it is not you but I who am pope" (Letter 239).

Bernard had long been concerned about corruption in the church. Sometime during 1127–28 he had written a work ***On the Duties and Conduct of Bishops*** in which he protested against abuses. He also, in 1150–1152, portrayed the ideal bishop in his hagiographical ***Life of St. Malachy***, the Bishop of Armagh in Ireland who died while visiting Clairvaux.

With his former pupil as pope he had the perfect excuse to turn his attention to the papacy. In the very year of Eugenius's appointment Bernard began his work ***On Consideration***. Addressed to Eugenius, it was not completed until 1153, the year in which they both died. In it he urges the pope to

find time for reflection or meditation in the midst of his busy life. He should consider himself (his person and his office), those placed under him, those around him at Rome, and those above him in the heavenly world. Bernard had a high view of the papacy. The pope is "the unique vicar of Christ who presides over not a single people but over all" (2:8:16), and he has fullness of power. However, Bernard is equally emphatic in his opposition to papal tyranny:

> We will understand ourselves better if we realize that a ministry has been imposed upon us rather than a dominion bestowed... It seems to me that you have been entrusted with stewardship over the world, not given possession of it... There is no poison more dangerous for you, no sword more deadly, than the passion to rule. Certainly you may attribute much to yourself, but unless you are greatly deceived you will not think that you have received anything more than stewardship from the great apostles. (2:6:9; 3:1:1–2)

A Great Leader of a Tragic Cause

The following year the new pope called for the Second Crusade to be launched to protect the Holy Land from Arab invasion. He appointed Bernard to promote the cause. Bernard's father had taken part in the First Crusade (1096–1099), which had succeeded in taking Jerusalem, and Bernard was happy to accept.

He traveled around Europe calling upon rulers and ruled alike to enlist in "the cause of Christ." Among other things he put an end to the activities of one misguided monk who was urging the crusaders to practice their military skills by massacring the Jews in Germany.

Bernard was successful in launching the Crusade, which began in 1148, but it was a dismal failure. This was a severe blow for Bernard, whose popularity took a nosedive. He consoled himself that it was better for people to be angry with him than with God. However, Bernard's reputation was great enough to survive such a setback. He died in 1153 and was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1174.

Master of the Spiritual Life

Bernard is remembered above all as a master of the spiritual life. In one sense all of his writings are on this theme, but three in particular may be singled out. One of his first two treatises was ***The Steps of Humility and Pride***, written before 1125, in which Bernard expounds the 12 steps of humility described by Benedict in his ***Rule***. This work contains some perceptive insights into human nature:

> Humility is a virtue by which a man has a low opinion of himself because he knows himself well... Just as pure truth is seen only by the pure of heart, so also a brother's miseries are truly experienced only by one who has misery in his own heart. You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your soul. When a man has been bragging that he is better than others he would feel ashamed of himself if he did not live up to his boast and show how much better than others he is... He does not so much want to be better as to be seen to be better. He is not so much concerned about leading a better life as appearing to others to do so... When a man thinks he is better than others will he not put himself before others? He must have the first place in gatherings, be the first to speak in council. He comes without being called. He interferes without being asked. He must rearrange everything, redo whatever has been done. What he himself did not do or arrange is not rightly done or properly arranged. (1:2, 3:6,14:42)

At a later stage, sometime between 1126 and 1141, Bernard wrote one of his best known works, ***On Loving God***. Probably his most renowned work, however, is his ***Sermons on the Song of***

Songs. These 86 sermons were written between 1135 and his death. Although they have the outward appearance of sermons, they are in fact a literary work designed to be read rather than preached. Again, although they follow the text of the Song of Solomon (reaching only the beginning of chapter three), these are really a series of sermons on themes relating to the spiritual life, with only a tangential connection with the text. In these sermons we see Bernard's approach to theology:

> There are some who long to know for the sole purpose of knowing, and that is shameful curiosity; others who long to know in order to become known, and that is shameful vanity... There are others still who long for knowledge in order to sell its fruits for money or honors, and this is shameful profiteering; others again who long to know in order to be of service, and this is charity. Finally there are those who long to know in order to benefit themselves, and this is prudence. (36:3)

In these sermons Bernard also speaks of his own mystical experience:

> I want to tell you of my own experience, as I promised. Not that it is of any importance... I admit that the Word has also come to me—I speak as a fool—and has come many times. But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going. (74:5)

Some of the sermons which Bernard actually preached are preserved. There is also a further series of 'literary' sermons for the various Sundays and festivals of the church year. Bernard's exegesis of the Bible is predominantly allegorical, in line with the approach of the time. His use of this technique earned him the title "mellifluous" (sweetly flowing, as with honey) meaning that he was able to draw the honey of the spiritual meaning out of the letter of Scripture.

The allegorical approach is out of favor today. And though Bernard's exegetical approach may be considered inadequate, this does not mean that his writings are necessarily unbiblical. The teaching which Bernard might extract from or illustrate by an unlikely text is as likely as not taught explicitly elsewhere. Furthermore, the text of Bernard's writings is soaked in Scripture in that there are biblical allusions every few lines.

Bernard of Clairvaux is a great and fascinating figure in the history of the Church. In some ways he is remote from and alien to our age. In other ways his life is an expression of an unchanging Christian spirituality—one that transcends all the barriers of time and culture.

Acknowledgements--

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Snapshots of a Saint

Stories that reveal Francis's intense, complex personality.

Like all great people, Francis cannot be sufficiently "explained." Writing about Francis can take us only so far in comprehending him. It is better sometimes to sit back and simply watch him in action. The following stories have been culled from the hundreds of events recorded in Francis's early biographies.

To Kiss a Leper

One day while Francis was praying fervently to God, he received an answer: "O Francis, if you want to know my will, you must hate and despise all that which hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess. Once you begin to do this, all that formerly seemed sweet and pleasant to you will become bitter and unbearable, and instead, the things that formerly made you shudder will bring you great sweetness and content." Francis was divinely comforted and greatly encouraged by these words.

Then one day, as he was riding near Assisi, he met a leper. He had always felt an overpowering horror of these sufferers, but making a great effort, he conquered his aversion, dismounted, and, in giving the leper a coin, kissed his hand. The leper then gave him the kiss of peace, after which Francis remounted his horse and rode on his way.

Some days later he took a large sum of money to the leper hospital, and gathering all the inmates together, he gave them alms, kissing each of their hands. Formerly he could neither touch or even look at lepers, but when he left them on that day, what had been so repugnant to him had really and truly been turned into something pleasant.

Indeed, his previous aversion to lepers had been so strong, that, besides being incapable of looking at them, he would not even approach the places where they lived. And if by chance he happened to pass anywhere near their dwellings or to see one of the lepers, even though he was moved to give them an alms through some intermediate person, he would nevertheless turn his face away and hold his nose. But, strengthened by God's grace, he was enabled to obey the command and to love what he had hated and to abhor what he had hitherto wrongfully loved.

—Legend of the Three Companions

A Stone for a Pillow

Francis would not allow his resting place to be laid over with covers or garments when he received hospitality, but the bare ground received his bare limbs, with only a tunic between. When at times he refreshed his small body with sleep, he very often slept sitting up, and in no other position, using a piece of wood or a stone as a pillow.

When his appetite for something particular was aroused, as often happens, he seldom ate that thing afterward. Once, when in an infirmity he had eaten a little chicken, after he regained his strength of body he entered the city of Assisi, and when he had come to the gate of the city, he commanded a certain brother who was with him to tie a rope about his neck and to drag him in this way like a robber through the entire city and to shout in the voice of a herald, saying, "Behold the glutton who has grown

fat on the meat of chickens, which he ate without you knowing about it."

Many therefore ran to see so great a spectacle, and weeping together with great sighs, they said, "Woe to us miserable ones, whose whole life is spent in blood and who nourish our hearts and bodies with uncleanness and drunkenness." And thus, pierced to the heart, they were moved to a better way of life by so great an example.

Often, when he was honored by all, he suffered the deepest sorrow, and rejecting the favor of men, he would see to it that he would be rebuked by someone. He would call some brother to him, saying to him, "In obedience, I say to you, revile me harshly and speak the truth against the lies of these others." And when that brother, though unwilling, would say he was a boor, a hired servant, a worthless being, Francis, smiling and applauding very much, would reply, "May the Lord bless you, for you have spoken most truly; it is becoming that the son of Peter of Bernardone should hear such things."

—Celano, ***First Life***

Preaching to the Birds

When he was near Bevagna, he came to a spot where there was a huge flock of birds of various kinds. The moment he saw them, he ran to them and greeted them as if they understood, and they all turned towards him and waited for him. Those that had perched on the bushes bent their heads, when he came near, and looked at him in an extraordinary way.

He went straight up to them and appealed to them all to hear the word of God, saying, "My brothers, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator. He clothed you with feathers and gave you wings to fly, appointing the clear air as your home, and he looks after you without any effort on your part." As he continued speaking to them like this, the birds showed their pleasure in a wonderful fashion; they stretched out their necks and flapped their wings, gazing at him with their beaks open.

In his spiritual enthusiasm, Francis walked among them, brushing them with his habit, and not one of them moved until he made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to go. Then they all flew away together with his blessing. His companions who were waiting on the road saw everything and when the saint rejoined them, in the purity and simplicity of his heart, he began to reproach himself for his negligence in never preaching to the birds before.

—Bonaventure, ***Major Life***

Money and Dung

Francis, the true friend and imitator of Christ, utterly despised all things belonging to this world and hated money above all else. He always urged his brethren both by word and example to avoid it as they would the Devil. And he told the friars to have as little love and use for money as for dung.

One day, a layman happened to enter Saint Mary of the Portiuncula to pray and laid some money near the cross as an offering. When he had left, one of the friars unthinkingly picked it up and placed it on a window ledge. But when this was reported to blessed Francis, this friar, realizing himself detected, at once hastened to ask forgiveness, and falling to the ground, offered himself for punishment.

The holy Father reproved him and took him severely to task for touching the money. And he ordered him to take the money from the window in his mouth, carry it outside the friary, and lay it on a heap of ass's dung.

When this friar readily obeyed this order, all who saw or heard were filled with the greatest fear, and thenceforward despised money as ass's dung.

—Mirror of Perfection

Demolishing a Building

At this period, the friars had only a single poor cell thatched with straw, with walls of wattle and daub. So when the time drew near for the general chapter [meeting of friars], which was held each year at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, the people of Assisi, realizing that the friars were increasing in number daily, and that all of them assembled there each year, held a meeting. And within a few days, with great haste and zeal, they erected a large building of stone and mortar while blessed Francis was absent and knew nothing of it.

When he returned from one of the provinces and arrived for the chapter, he was astonished at the house built there. And he was afraid that the sight of the house might make other friars build similar large houses in the places where they lived or were to live, and he desired this place to remain the example and pattern for all other houses of the Order. So before the chapter ended he climbed onto the roof of the house and told other friars to climb up with him. And with their help, he began to throw to the ground the tiles with which the house was roofed, intending to destroy it to the very foundations.

But some men-at-arms of Assisi were present to protect the place from the great crowd of sightseers who had gathered to watch the chapter of the friars. And when they saw that blessed Francis and other friars intended to destroy the house, they went up to him at once and said, "Brother, this house belongs to the Commune [district] of Assisi, and we are here to represent the Commune. We forbid you to destroy our house."

When he heard this, blessed Francis said to them, "If the house is yours, I will not touch it." And forthwith he and the other friars came down.

—Mirror of Perfection

Perfect Joy

One day at Saint Mary, Saint Francis called Brother Leo and said, "Brother Leo, write this down."

He answered, "I'm ready."

"Write what true joy is," he said. "A messenger comes and says that all the masters of theology in Paris have joined the Order—write: that is not true joy. Or all the prelates beyond the mountains—archbishops and bishops, or the King of France and the King of England—write: that is not true joy. Or that my friars have gone to the unbelievers and have converted all of them to the faith; or that I have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and I perform many miracles. I tell you that true joy is not in all those things."

"But what is true joy?"

"I am returning from Perugia, and I am coming here at night, in the dark. It is winter time and wet and muddy and so cold that icicles form at the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs, and blood flows from such wounds. And I come to the gate, all covered with mud and cold and ice, and after I have knocked and called for a long time, a friar comes and asks, 'Who are you?' I answer, 'Brother Francis.' And he says, 'Go away. This is not a decent time to be going about. You can't come in.'

"And when I insist again, he replies, 'Go away. You are a simple and uneducated fellow. From now on don't stay with us anymore. We are so many and so important that we don't need you.'

"But I still stand at the gate and say, 'For the love of God, let me come in tonight.' And he answers, 'I won't. Go to the Crosiers' Place [another monastery] and ask there.'

"I tell you that if I kept patience and was not upset—that is true joy and true virtue and salvation of the soul."

—14th century Latin manuscript

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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The Case for Downward Mobility

Why did Francis insist that his followers live in absolute poverty?

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Francis was the son of a cloth merchant, yet after his conversion he wore a miserable, threadbare patched tunic.

When his father begged Assisi's bishop to stop his crazy son from giving away family property, Francis stood in front of the bishop and stripped himself naked to proclaim that he had no father but God.

In the surging profit economy of northern Italy, Francis told a Franciscan brother who had accepted a coin to shove it into a dunghill with his lips.

Crucial events in Francis's relationship with Jesus Christ turned on poverty. He was enamored with the poverty modeled by Christ and the disciples, and he insisted his followers live in radical poverty. Why?

Poor Jesus

Francis was not a systematic theologian articulating an explicit, developed doctrine of poverty. He preferred acting out the truth to stating it in bald words. Still, his ***Admonitions*** (a collection of directives to his friars), and the ***Earlier*** and ***Later Rules*** (guides for his Order), offer material for an outline of his "gospel of Jesus' poverty."

To Francis the Gospels made it utterly clear that the only way to know God was through Jesus. And the Jesus Francis knew was humble:

"Why do you not recognize the truth and believe in the Son of God? See, daily he humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; daily he comes to us in a humble form; daily he comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest" (***Admonitions*** I:15–18).

Jesus was the one who emptied himself of status and glory and came as one who was humble and poor. Francis saw Jesus as coming in humility whether as a poor preacher or through a piece of bread (in Communion). Status and glory went with wealth; the high and the mighty were always the rich. But the crucified Jesus was lowly, weak, and therefore ***poor***.

Those whom Jesus called to repent of the world's way and to follow his "footprints" to eternal life had to be humble like him, renouncing the pride of station and power. That meant renouncing possessions above all. When Francis stood in front of the bishop of Assisi and stripped off his father's clothing, it was a symbolic renunciation of his birth family's whole life, a round of godless getting and spending.

Relinquishing the Will

Ever since the Fall, humans had claimed to possess things for themselves alone. Francis was particularly harsh about any form of "appropriation": arrogating to oneself what is God's:

"The Lord said to Adam: Eat of every tree; do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was able to eat of every tree of paradise, since he did not sin, as long as he did not go against obedience. For the person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good ***who appropriates to himself his own will*** and thus exalts himself over the good things which the Lord says and does in him; and thus ... what he eats becomes for him the fruit of the knowledge of evil" (***Admonitions*** II:14; emphasis added).

Glorying in your thoughts and deeds or lording it over brothers and sisters or owning property—all alike were acts of appropriation. They blocked out God and neighbor in favor of self. They did precisely what Jesus had not done. They flew in the face of the reality that God alone was Lord.

That reality, Francis constantly reminded his hearers, God would enforce at the Last Judgment. Thus Jesus' call to repentance was a call to turn from appropriation to poverty:

"The Lord says in the Gospel: 'He who does not renounce everything he possesses cannot be my disciple,' and 'He who wishes to save his life must lose it' " (Luke 14:33, 9:24; ***Admonitions*** III:1).

Concrete Acts

Anyone who decided to join Francis had to give away all possessions to the poor and live as the poorest of the poor.

Francis knew that some people who sincerely wanted to follow Jesus on the way of poverty could not lawfully do so. Bishops had no right to renounce the incomes and prerogatives of their sees; married people could not break up their households and vow poverty and celibacy without a spouse's permission. For such people, Francis said, the spiritual desire to do so was enough. He supported the Franciscan "Third Order," which permitted people to follow a rule of simplicity and devotion to Jesus while remaining in callings they were not free to abandon.

Yet all through his life, he insisted on literal poverty whenever possible. Concrete, life-changing acts were more pungent for Francis than feelings or abstract principles:

"Woe to that religious [friar] who does not keep in his heart the good things the Lord reveals to him and who does not manifest them to others ***by his actions***, but rather seeks to make such good things known by his words. He thereby receives his reward, while those who listen to him carry away but little fruit" (***Admonitions*** XXI:23; emphasis added).

Joyful Poverty

Following Jesus' poverty inevitably brought suffering, which Francis accepted as self-mortification. His last years were suffused with darkness and pain, culminating in his receiving the stigmata of the Crucified (wounds in his hands, feet, and side). Yet these years also brought blessing and joy:

"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God. The truly pure of heart are those who despise the things of earth and seek the things of heaven, and who never cease to adore and behold the Lord God living and true with a pure heart and soul" (***Admonitions*** XVI:12).

Those who were truly poor, and who thus did not appropriate honor or glory to themselves, were the only ones who could freely give honor and glory to God. Francis's praise of God erupted at all times, even at the times of greatest darkness, as the ***Canticle of Brother Sun*** makes plain. The ***Earlier Rule***, a list of demanding exhortations to the freedom of holy poverty, appropriately concludes with an ecstatic hymn:

Let all of us
wherever we are
in every place
at every hour
at every time of day
everyday and continually
believe truly and humbly
and keep in [our] heart
and love, honor, adore, serve
praise and bless
glorify and exalt
magnify and give thanks to
the most high and supreme eternal God
Trinity and Unity
the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit
Creator of all
Savior of all who believe in Him
and hope in Him
and love Him
Who is
without beginning and without end unchangeable, invisible,
indescribable, ineffable
incomprehensible, unfathomable,
blessed, worthy of praise,
glorious, exalted on high, sublime most high, gentle, lovable,
delectable and totally desirable
above all else
forever.
Amen.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

1272 Thomas Aquinas Concludes His Word on Summa Theologiae

The massive treatise set forth a theological system so influential it has been declared eternally valid.

"The Dumb Ox"—that was the name given by his college classmates to the heavy, quiet, and serious lad from the Count of Aquino's family. They might never have guessed that the Ox would produce eighteen huge volumes of theology, nor that the theological system he constructed would become an official theology of Catholicism.

The greatest theologian of the Middle Ages was born about 1225 to a wealthy and noble family. At age 5, the pudgy boy was sent to the school at the nearby monastery of Monte Cassino (the community founded by Benedict seven hundred years earlier). At age 14, Thomas went to the University of Naples, where his Dominican teacher so impressed him that Thomas decided he, too, would join the new, study-oriented Dominican order.

His family fiercely opposed the decision (apparently wanting him to become an influential and financially secure abbot or archbishop rather than take a friar's vow of poverty). Thomas's brothers kidnapped him and confined him for fifteen months; his family tempted him with a prostitute and an offer to buy him the post of Archbishop of Naples.

All attempts failed, and Thomas went to Paris, medieval Europe's center of theological study. While there he fell under the spell of the famous teacher Albertus Magnus, also known as Albert the Great.

Thomas's Educational Climate

In medieval Europe, the idea of "secular education" had not occurred to anyone. All learning took place under the eye of the church, and theology reigned supreme in the sciences. Yet Thomas lived in a time when nonChristian philosophers were stirring the minds of many thinkers. Aristotle the Greek, Averroes the Muslim, Maimonides the Jew—their (and others') works were being translated into Latin. Scholars were fascinated particularly by Aristotle, whose works had been unknown in Europe for centuries. He seemed to have explained the entire universe not by using Scripture, but simply by using his powers of observation and logic.

The new (or newly translated) philosophies' emphasis on reason, however, threatened to undermine traditional Christian beliefs. Could an intellectual person who held to the reasonable new philosophies retain his or her faith?

Thomas's *Summa*

Thomas avidly followed Aristotle. But, feeling more devoted to the church than to any brand of philosophy, Thomas determined to extract from Aristotle's writings what was acceptable to Christianity.

At the beginning of his massive ***Summa Theologiae*** (which means "A summation of theological knowledge"), Thomas stated, "In sacred theology, all things are treated from the standpoint of God." Thomas proceeded to distinguish between philosophy and theology, and between reason and revelation, though he emphasized that these did not contradict each other. Both are fountains of knowledge; both come from God.

Reason, said Thomas (following Aristotle), is based on sensory data—what we can see, feel, hear, smell, and touch. Revelation is based on more. While reason can lead us to believe in God—something that other theologians had already proposed—only revelation can show us God as he really is, the Triune God of the Bible.

Thomas's theology is not easy reading. Few modern readers can sit through many pages of his intricate reasonings. Yet all can appreciate his attempt to harmonize revelation with reason. He showed that though revelation never contradicts reason—a conclusion many would dispute—reason alone is not sufficient to understand ourselves or God. Sense experience can explain some of nature's workings, but heavenly knowledge alone, which every believer will experience after death, gives clear knowledge of God. And though a person apart from Christianity can practice certain "natural virtues," only a believer can practice faith, hope, and love, the truly Christian virtues.

Thomas's Legacy

Thomas' work, along with his many other writings (notably the ***Summa Contra Gentiles***, a manual for missionaries to the Muslims, which also contains some lovely hymns), was not universally well received at first. Some of his statements were condemned after his death, though the condemnations were later reversed. But before long Thomas' system gained preeminence. When Catholicism faced the rise of Protestantism in Europe, it used the works of Thomas in drafting the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–63). Four years later, Thomas was declared a "doctor of the church." And in 1879, the papal bull A***eterni Patris*** endorsed Thomism (Aquinas's theology) as an authentic expression of doctrine and said it should be studied by all students of theology. Today, both Protestant and Catholic scholars draw upon his writings, and no one can claim to be a theologian unless he or she is familiar with his work.

Thomas Aquinas himself might not have approved. In spite of his stature as a teacher and author, he remained humble throughout his life. Consistently he turned down offers to be made bishop or abbot. More remarkable than this was an announcement he made three months before his death in 1274. He said, after apparently seeing a heavenly vision during a worship service, "All that I have hitherto written seems to me nothing but straw ... compared to what has been revealed to me." He gave up all theological writing, and so the ***Summa Theologiae*** was never actually completed.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 49: Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages

Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Christian History Interview - Stepping Into a Christian Culture

Medieval Christianity seems dark and foreign—until you take a closer look.

an interview with JOHN VAN ENGEN

The medieval world conjures up all sorts of images, but it's the unusual ones that often stick in our minds: a woman kneeling at a saint's shrine, groups whipping themselves, monks wearing hair shirts—and on it goes.

Yet in spite of what seems eccentric to us, medieval Europe was a thoroughly Christian culture, and as such, it's a culture we should be able to understand, and one whose legacies we should be able to appreciate.

To talk about the "age of faith," Christian History ***spoke with John Van Engen, professor of history and head of the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana.***

Christian History: What are some of the greatest misunderstandings modern Christians have about medieval religion?

John Van Engen: First, they assume that Catholicism was a monolithic system, from pope down to individuals, and that it was this way for a thousand years. But from a.d. 500 to 1517, European Catholicism underwent enormous changes; there were periods of centralization and of decentralization.

Furthermore, in a world that had poor transportation, no televisions, and no telephones, the idea of a pope handing out orders that would be obeyed at the local level everywhere—well, that's something of a dream. When you think about medieval religion, you have to think in regional terms: Catholicism in southern France, in England, in northern Italy, and so on. Though the vast majority of Christians shared the same beliefs and some common forms of worship, there was great diversity in the Middle Ages.

Second, a great many moderns think medieval religion is mostly about "superstition," e.g., the cult of the saints, and people crossing themselves repeatedly.

Why are such misunderstandings so common?

Our image of the Middle Ages has been colored in two ways. First by Reformation preaching and teaching. Protestants tended to paint the Catholic Middle Ages in very black terms in order to justify the kind of radical changes they sought.

In addition, we are heirs of the Enlightenment much more than we realize. The Enlightenment exalted reason, and thus repudiated revelation, faith, religious ritual, and rote learning as ignorant superstitions. That has colored our ability to appreciate the medieval religious culture, which tried to base itself on revelation as much as reason.

Rigorous fasting and self-flagellation seem eccentric. Were they?

People in the Middle Ages had a strong sense they were to love God not just with their minds but also with their bodies. By disciplining the body and its passions, they believed they disciplined their souls, pleased God, and prepared themselves to receive grace.

That's why we see so much abstaining from sex, praying all night, walking barefooted several miles to a shrine.

They believed the truly Christian life involves a certain measure of self-denial, which includes the mortification of the flesh. Our

sinfulness lies not only in wills but also in passions gone astray. So you have to bring your whole bodily regimen in line with Christ.

It isn't enough to avoid punching your neighbor in the nose, you also have to rid yourself of anger. How do you discipline that? They had this idea (not so modern it turns out) that you get at the inner part of you through (a) prayer and confession and (b) disciplining the body—fasting, going on a pilgrimage, even torturing the body. In this way, they would repress or drive out things like lust, gluttony, and greed.

For many people, these activities became self-punishments or satisfaction for sin. To Protestants this is a misunderstanding of Christ's atonement. But there was also that other dimension of discipline that makes sense to most of us.

So if we just tried to understand medieval religion, we would identify with it more?

Yes and no. Yes because whenever we try to understand another age, we come to appreciate some of its strengths. But no because there are many features Protestants will still find disturbing.

for example, take the cult of the saints. In addition to prayers to the Trinity and to Jesus, medieval people prayed to the saints, and in some instances this moved into worship of the saints. Or they would spend more time at a shrine of Mary than at their parish church.

What were the greatest challenges medieval priests faced in teaching people the Christian faith?

Teaching an illiterate culture was one; helping people, most of whom did not understand Latin, appreciate the Latin Mass, was another. A third was eradicating superstition.

Before Christianity came to Europe, various forms of superstition and paganism were all that people knew. By 1100 much of Western Europe was formally converted, but pagan superstition had a way of hanging on. If you put yourself in the shoes of a medieval person, you can see why.

Let's say your wife is with child, and the pregnancy is going poorly. You're worried both mother and child could die during birth. You pray to Jesus, and more likely, you pray earnestly to Mary, who was thought to look out for women in difficult childbirth.

But also in your village, there's a woman who says, "Whenever we've had this problem, we boil certain herbs, lay them on the mother-to-be's tummy, and say a certain charm—and that really helps."

People didn't see this as contrary to their faith. It was like going to the drug store and getting a little extra help. But the priest had to try to convince people this was unhealthy spiritually.

What would have been some of the great successes of the medieval church in this regard?

By the sixteenth century, all of Europe (apart from the Jews) was in principle Christian, and many people were devout believers—and all this in an extended area that a thousand years earlier had only a handful of Christians.

This produced a widespread ethical outlook. In spite of rampant illiteracy, the absence of radio and television, a poor system of transportation, and stubborn regionalism, there was a commonly shared understanding of how people should live and act. This is particularly amazing because today we assume that to teach moral standards to an entire culture requires strongly centralized government, mass communication, and literacy.

What are some of the legacies the medieval church has left us?

There are a number of cultural legacies, like the modern university. The University of Paris, of Oxford, of Cambridge, and others were all founded in the Middle Ages. The medieval church was anxious to have an educated clergy who would in turn educate the laity. But there was also a drive to organize knowledge and understand the created universe, and this drive arises directly out of medieval theology.

There are also modern religious assumptions that arise out of the Middle Ages. For instance, we Christians assume that the culture around us ought to be Christian. This was not an expectation of the early church, which assumed the world around it would remain mostly hostile to the faith. But today many Christians are angry and frustrated when our culture is not Christian. That's a medieval world view.

Another modern assumption begun in the Middle Ages: the death of Christ should be at the center of Christian faith. We forget there are systems of Christianity with other emphases, like the Orthodox with their concern about the Trinity. The notion that the Christian faith hinges on the suffering and death of Christ, and the forgiveness of sin, is a special contribution of the western medieval church.

When the Reformers came along, they changed this theology in certain crucial ways, but they still assumed the central theme was the passion of Christ—not the Trinity or even the Resurrection.

You allude to justification by faith. Was this doctrine forgotten in the Middle Ages?

Medieval theologians taught that faith was an essential step in being made right with God. But at the popular level, people tended to take faith for granted. They grew up with it. Everybody they knew was a Christian. So they concentrated on good works.

In addition, they listened to the apostle Paul. He talks a great deal not only about faith but also about love, and the end of each of his letters is full of specific admonitions to do good works. So, for the medieval person, the central concern was on making faith manifest in love.

Once you begin worrying about whether your good works are good enough, you can soon drive yourself spiritually crazy. There's a lot of evidence of this kind of unhealthy intensity in the late Middle Ages.

You've studied the Middle Ages for decades as a member of the Christian Reformed Church. How has it impacted your faith?

I have a more balanced notion about the relationship of the mind and body, between the cognitive side of faith and the part that expresses itself in worship and ethics. I've been able to blend many medieval insights into a belief system that is still in essence Calvinist.

Christianity and Compassion
By David Feddes

The man was caught in the act of committing a crime. His crime was considered such a serious offense against society that the government executed him. What deed brought him the death penalty? He fed and cared for deformed and crippled children who survived attempts to abort or abandon them. It was thought that society would be better off without such children, so the man who saved their lives was an enemy of the people and had to die himself. This man, Benignus, was a Christian in the Roman Empire. His compassion clashed with accepted Roman practices of aborting, abandoning, or drowning children with disabilities. When he violated Roman standards by giving these children life, Benignus had to be punished with death.

Does it sound strange that Christian compassion would be a crime punishable by death? You may think caring and compassion are virtues valued by almost all civilized people in almost every culture. But that's not so. The Greek philosopher Plato said that a poor man who was no longer able to work because of sickness should be left to die. The Roman philosopher Plautus declared, "You do a beggar bad service by giving him food and drink; you lose what you give and prolong his life for more misery." In other words, you're better off spending your money on yourself, and the poor person is better off dead. Greco-Roman civilization thought compassion for the weak would weaken the society, and various cultures have taken a similar approach, worshiping wealth and war and viewing compassion as bad.

Compassion toward needy people has not been valued in every culture or in every religion. Some religions smother compassion by teaching such ideas as karma and reincarnation. They say that if people suffer, their problems are due to bad karma resulting from bad behavior in previous lives. The bad karma can be removed only by letting people continue to suffer and pay for what they did in an earlier life. This type of religion tends to produce a caste system, where people in one level of society congratulate themselves on their good karma and consider it a very bad thing to connect with people at another level or to help them in any way.

If compassion isn't a natural humanitarian impulse, and if it's not valued by all religions and cultures, then how has it come about that millions of people live in societies that do honor the ideal of compassion and do think it's important to care for the poor, the sick, and the disadvantaged? It's because of the impact of Jesus Christ on these societies.

Jesus' Life and Teaching

When Jesus walked this earth, the dominant civilizations of his time did more to harm the needy, weak, and sick than to help them. But when Jesus saw crowds of needy people "he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14). He helped the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk. When he saw hungry people, he had compassion on them and fed them (Mark 8:1-8). When he sent out his disciples, he directed them "to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:2). The words of the gospel were always to be accompanied by deeds of compassion and healing.

In the Roman Empire, the emperors and elite classes of society did not believe in compassion. If the government did anything at all to help the poor, it was only to prevent riots and to win political points from the people. If individuals helped others, they usually helped only their relatives or people with money or influence or reputation, because such people could pay back their help with even greater favors. It was considered foolish to help people who couldn't offer anything in return, and it could be downright criminal to help those who were thought to be better off dead.

Contrary to such thinking, Jesus told his followers not to limit their kindness to relatives and rich neighbors who would pay them back. Instead, said Jesus, be generous with "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

As Jesus practiced compassion and taught it to others, he made it clear that compassion is closely connected to eternal destiny. Jesus told about a rich man who did nothing to help a poor, sick beggar on the street outside his house. The beggar ended up happy in heaven, while the rich man ended up burning in hell, begging for a drop of water to cool his burning tongue (Luke 16:19-24). Jesus didn't mean that people earn eternal life for themselves by being nice, but he did mean that anyone who is truly rooted in Christ bears the fruit of compassion.

Jesus brings eternal life in the future world for those who trust and follow him, and his gospel also makes a difference in this world. Faith in Jesus has changed countless people and made them more compassionate and more eager to bring healing to others. Christ's compassion has also made Christians pioneers in starting hospitals, orphanages, and many other charity organizations. The impact of Christ reaches even beyond Christians to people who don't personally believe in Jesus as their Savior. Many such people value compassion, due to the ripple effect of Christ's influence on culture, and they benefit from institutions and organizations that have Christian roots.

Compassion Conquers

Jesus came into the world as the king of compassion, and his kingdom proved superior to kingdoms that opposed compassion. As God's kingdom in Christ grew and its influence spread, compassion grew and spread.

The church of Jesus grew rapidly in its first few centuries under the Roman government. This is amazing when we consider that becoming a Christian seemed to go against self-interest. If you became a Christian, the church taught you to share with people in need. Christians were expected to give at least a tenth of their income to charity. Who would want to become a Christian if it meant having less money to spend on yourself? Worse yet, becoming a Christian could get you killed! The Roman rulers harassed, tortured, and killed many Christians. Why would anyone become a Christian under such circumstances? But many did. They were drawn to the truth and love of Jesus. They preferred to show compassion and to suffer in fellowship with such a Savior rather than go through life without him, and they believed the promises of eternal life.

Roman culture had little use for compassion, thinking that kindness to the weak would weaken the whole culture. Only the strong survive, they thought. But as it turned out, the cold and cruel culture eventually collapsed, while kind and compassionate

Christianity kept spreading. Christianity was supposedly weak, but it ended up conquering the mightiest empire in the world. Compassion was not a weakness but a weapon for winning.

When pagans aborted or abandoned unwanted children, they reduced the pagan population. When Christians cared for children and kept them alive, they expanded the Christian population.

Another way Christian population outgrew the non-Christian population was through compassion for the sick. In those times of fewer medical cures, contagious diseases often became epidemics and killed huge numbers of people. Pagans abandoned people at the first sign of illness, but many Christians stayed with the sick and cared for them.

The Christian bishop Dionysius told of a deadly plague in the city of Alexandria around the year 250. The worshipers of pagan gods and goddesses "thrust aside anyone who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died." In contrast, said Dionysius, "Many of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains."

Now, it might seem that if Christians placed themselves at risk and caught fatal diseases from people they helped, there would be fewer and fewer Christians. But in fact, Christian compassion helped Christianity to keep growing, while paganism kept shrinking. Many Christians died while caring for others during these epidemics, but they also saved huge numbers of people by providing food, sanitation, and comfort. A historian estimates that Christian compassion cut the mortality rate by two thirds. As a result, Christian communities had far more survivors than pagan communities. Also, many surviving pagans owed their lives to Christians who cared for them when their own families and friends abandoned them. Such compassion won many pagans to Christ. After each epidemic, Christians were a larger percentage of the population than before.

Even those who went on rejecting Christ still had to acknowledge the power of Christian compassion. Anti-Christian emperor Julian the Apostate noted that Christians cared for each other and for non-Christians too. Julian said it was shameful that pagans could expect more assistance from Christians than from their own families and fellow pagans.

Another non-Christian writer, Lucian, was downright amazed by the Christians and exclaimed, "The earnestness with which the people of this religion help one another in their needs is incredible. They spare themselves nothing for this end. Their first lawgiver [Jesus] put it into their heads that they were all brethren." If Christians didn't have resources to help a hungry person, they would fast for a day or two and then, with what they saved by not eating, they would help the needy person.

Those Christians in the early centuries of the church weren't perfect, of course, but they belonged to the king of compassion, and it showed in countless acts of

personal kindness: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, healing the sick. Eventually it showed not just in personal deeds but also in institutions of compassion.

Institutions of Compassion

During the early centuries of terrible persecution, it wasn't possible for Christians to set up buildings and institutions. But by the time of the great ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325, persecution had ended and Christianity was legal. The Council of Nicea upheld the doctrine of the Trinity, but it didn't just stand for accurate teaching. The Council also ordered congregations to establish a hospital in every city with a cathedral. These hospitals provided lodging for strangers who were traveling and a place to recover for people who were sick. In later centuries, the hospitals developed more and more skill in healing, but already in the earliest days they were institutions to provide basic care and show Christ's love. Every hospital you see owes its original to Christian compassion.

Christians also established orphanages. This didn't happen right away. In the earliest centuries of persecution and worshiping in secret, Christian churches couldn't establish orphanages, but they did regularly take special collections during church services to assist orphans, and many orphans were taken into Christian homes and adopted. Disease was common and the average lifespan was short, so the church tried to protect children of the church from ever being left alone. When the church baptized babies, godparents were often involved, and a big part of the reason for this was that if the parents died, the godparents were to care for the children. Of course, if the parents lived, the godparents were supposed to pray for the children and support their development as Christians.

From the earliest days, Christians had a special concern for children and orphans, and once Christianity became legal, the church sought to help orphans on an even wider scale. Rather than let kids die on the street, the church established orphanages to provide housing, food, education, love, and Christian teaching. This was in tune with the biblical call "to look after orphans … in their distress" (James 1:27).

Historians point out that there were no orphanages before Christians started them. There were no hospitals for the poor or the general public until Christians started them. There's a little evidence that the Romans may have had some medical facilities for military personnel and for rich people, but it is certain that nobody bothered building anything for sick people in general until Christians did so.

Sociologist Alvin Schmidt says, "It is an astonishing mystery that the Greeks, who built large temples in honor of their numerous gods and goddesses … never build any hospitals… The situation was similar with the Romans, who were great builders of temples, large arenas, impressive aqueducts, and the highly advanced Appian Way." Why didn't the Greeks and Romans build hospitals? It obviously wasn't a lack of ability to build things, nor was it a lack of interest in anatomy and medicine. It was a lack of compassion.

The king of compassion changed things. As more and more people came to know Christ, more and more institutions of compassion appeared. Even in countries where a majority didn't become Christians, a few Christians often made a big difference. India, for example, was so enslaved to false ideas of karma, reincarnation, and the caste system that few successful people wanted to help the poor and sick. Christian

missionaries not only brought the gospel of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ but also brought Christian compassion and institutions, such as hospitals and orphanages, to India. Mother Teresa is a famous example of Christian compassion at work in India, but there have been other Christians like her in many nations, all motivated by Christ.

The influence of Christ is responsible not only for hospitals but also for the nursing profession and for the International Red Cross. The first nurses were monks and nuns funded by Christian offerings. The person who took modern nursing to a new level was Florence Nightingale, who said, “The kingdom of God is within, but we must also make it so without.” The founder of the International Red Cross was Jean Henri Dunant, who received the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901. Dunant said, “I am a disciple of Christ… and nothing more.” Later the Red Crescent was formed for Muslims who didn’t like the sign of the cross, but the fact remains that the Red Crescent wouldn’t exist if Christians hadn’t started the Red Cross.

Many churches have special organizations devoted to hunger relief, development, medical care, and other expressions of compassion. The Salvation Army was started by evangelical Christians in 1887. Leading people to faith in Christ and personal salvation has always been a basic motivation, but the Salvation Army also works with many churches to provide food, clothing, medical relief, rescue missions and rehabilitation centers for addicts.

Also, in 1887, Christian leaders met in Denver to start the Charity Organizations Society. This was the beginning of what later became known as the United Way. The United Way is no longer specifically Christian, but it was started by Christians.

Alcoholics Anonymous and various twelve-step recovery programs have their roots in Christian principles and were started by people whose thinking was shaped by Christianity.

Christians led the campaign for child labor laws, which put an end to exploiting children for cheap labor.

Christians pioneered ministries for prison inmates and their family members, showing compassion to people that few others care about.

Christians were the first to establish homes with special medical care for elderly people with needs too great to be met by themselves or their families.

I could go on and on listing innovations and institutions established by Christian compassion, but I trust it’s clear that Jesus, the king of compassion, has indeed been a world changer. In every age, Christians have been spurred on by the knowledge that Jesus takes personally our treatment of the poor and that when we serve them, we are serving him. At the end of the world, Jesus will say to Christians who show compassion, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me… whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

In My Name

We’ve seen that some civilizations had so little compassion that they actually treated compassion as a crime. The enormous influence of Jesus, however, has made

compassion a valued and admired ideal, even by those who often fall short of the idea or are not Christians at all. One writer says, “Christian ideals have permeated society until non-Christians, who claim to live a ‘decent life’ without religion, have forgotten the origin of the very content and context of their ‘decency.’”

Many people—even those who consider compassion a good thing—don’t know Christ and don’t know the Christian roots of compassion in their civilization. They may just take it for granted that compassion is good, but that’s not something we can afford to take for granted. If we don’t know the source of compassion, we won’t know why people and their society are becoming less compassionate until it’s too late. We may even reach a point where society treats compassionate Christians as criminals, like the Roman Empire sometimes did. In fact, that point may be closer than we realize.

For instance, government officials sometimes investigate crisis pregnancy centers, requiring information on all their activities and on every client they ever served. What shady things are these centers involved in? They provide free pregnancy tests, free sonograms, baby clothes, nutrition, parental training, encouragement, and counseling to pregnant women in difficult situations. Government officials do not harass abortion clinics, but they do harass people who help pregnant women and their babies, saying they might be “practicing medicine without a license” or not following proper advertising procedures. When baby killers have official government approval while the forces of compassion are almost criminalized, it’s evidence that compassion can’t thrive without a living connection to Christ.

Faith in Christ is the root which nourishes compassion in society and in individuals. It’s a fact that most charitable organizations have Christian roots. It’s also a fact that at an individual level, compassion depends largely on faith in Christ. Committed Christians are far more generous on the average than their non-Christian neighbors. Surveys of giving patterns show that the most generous givers are either Christians or have a Christian family influence within a generation or two.

Jesus spoke of giving “a cup of water in my name” (Mark 9:41). Compassion doesn’t have the same quality if it’s not done in Jesus’ name, and in the long run, it won’t have the same quantity either. If Jesus’ name and reign are ignored, then sharing a cup of cold water and other acts of kindness become less and less common. So give thanks for all Christ has done to make his people and your society more compassionate. Give thanks for all that has been done and is still being done in Jesus’ name. And be sure to put your faith in that name. Believe in Jesus, the only name by which you can be saved. Trust the king of compassion, and enlist in his armies of compassion.