

Chapter 6

The Final Victory Over Paganism

We probably need to take the term “final victory” with a grain of salt. Possibly it could apply in some way to the established Roman Empire, but only with certain reservations. The Americas were yet to be “discovered” and the Far East - India, China, Japan etc. would not become Christian missionary targets for nearly a thousand years into the future.

However, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, for Christianity the fourth century was pivotal for many reasons. When Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 312 several important things happened: 1) the persecutions stopped, 2) the groundwork was laid for Christianity to become the official religion of the Roman Empire, 3) Christians were not only tolerated, but clergy and laity had their social standing enhanced by a friendly emperor, 4) Christian theology in a Hellenistic cultural setting was begun and 5) some of the fruits of this theology settled ongoing theological debates as crystallized in two great Ecumenical Councils.

At the Council of Nicea (325) the divinity of Jesus was defined against Arius and a creed was formulated. At the Council of Constantinople (381) the Nicene Creed was finalized and the true humanity of Jesus was defined against Apollinarius. In the process, the creed established the formulation of the Trinity as three Persons in one God.

Until the time of Constantine the growth in Christian converts had been minimal. There were many reasons: preaching had been outlawed, there were intermittent persecutions, the apologists and martyrs had impressed few pagans and pagan cults were still identified with and supported by the Roman Empire, which was highly successful and at peace. In pagan culture power was the name of the game, if the pagan gods seemed to support and give power to the empire they must be held in high honor. To do otherwise was not only foolish, but an act of treason.

The fourth century was not without its difficulties for Christianity, but by the end of the century Christianity had grown from a tiny persecuted Jewish sect into a major religious force in an empire that now held it to be the state religion. Christianity had begun its inevitable triumph over paganism, at least in the West. It was a startling historical development.

Christianity and the Fourth Century Emperors - We shall now briefly outline the history of Christianity in the fourth century by noting important events in the reigns of some of the emperors who succeeded Constantine.

From Constantine to Julian - Constantine died in 337 and the empire was now in the hands of his three sons who continued to support Christianity. The legacy of Constantine facilitated this ongoing support. When Constantine moved the seat of the empire to Constantinople, he had designed a city in imitation of Rome (including seven hills), but unlike Rome in that it was now a Christian city. Government buildings and old pagan

shrines were often converted into Christian Churches. The seats of imperial government were now populated mainly by Christians. The old pagan Roman aristocracy and Senate in Rome no longer had much influence.

Because of the social mobility initiated by Diocletian and Constantine, many middle class citizens, some of whom were Christians, were now admitted to the new aristocracy. The old aristocracy who traditionally had supported the pagan cults were no longer the majority. The way was thus cleared for an acceptance of Christianity by these new influential members of society. To be Christian was now socially acceptable and often socially beneficial. Unfortunately, wealth and official favor could often replace religious conviction as a reason for becoming Christian.

Constantine's son, Constantius II became sole ruler in 350. He was dedicated to the advancement of Christianity, although he supported Arianism. Arianism was still an important factor in Christian theology and during this time the East Germans (Goths, Vandals, Burgundians) were converted to Arian Christianity.

In his attack on paganism, Constantius closed temples and cult sites and made it a capital crime to participate in pagan sacrifices. While he still permitted the observance of traditional pagan feast days and initiations into the mystery cults, he removed from the Senate the statue of Victory which had been placed there by Augustus after the battle of Actium.

Under Constantius pagan religion declined in the East, but was still evident in the West, especially in the rural parts of Italy, Gaul (France) and Spain. In Rome the old conservative aristocracy was resentful of Constantinople and clung to the old pagan traditions which they felt had made Rome so successful through the centuries. They reasoned that the pagan gods had given Rome power for nearly a thousand years, why desert them for this strange new religion.

Julian II to Theodosius - Julian was a nephew of Constantine and a cousin of Constantius. He was raised as a Christian in the imperial household of Constantine. After Constantine's death he witnessed a series of political murders of his cousins and relatives designed to eliminate certain rivals to the throne.

He was kept under the watchful eye of Constantius and was finally made a "caesar" by him and placed in command of a Roman army on the frontier. There Julian was proclaimed Augustus by his troops and was marching against Constantius to take power, when Constantius conveniently died in 361. Julian was now emperor.

Julian marched into Constantinople and announced that he was no longer Christian and that he intended to restore the traditional pagan religion. Thus, Christian historians dubbed him, Julian "the Apostate". While he did not actively persecute Christians, he restored pagan temples, gave preference of pagans in political appointments, took away the privileges of the Christian clergy, imported various Oriental cults and ordered a

renewal of the cult of the ancient gods. Interestingly, he was still very much impressed by Christian morality and encouraged pagan devotees to lead moral lives above and beyond that of the Christians.

Julian failed to restore paganism and eliminate Christianity. Many reasons are given - the superiority of Christianity, the baseness of paganism - however, historians cite the fact that Julian died in battle in 363, just two years after he became emperor, as an obvious major contributing cause. Interestingly, because of Julian's military defeat, paganism was discredited by many. As we noted, Roman gods were valued because of their power and when they were no longer viewed as powerful, they could be easily dismissed. They were no longer felt to be useful.

In any event, near the middle of the century, Christianity was the most powerful religious force, at least in the Eastern Empire. It is instructive to note that upon Julian's death, his troops elected a Christian man of German descent named Jovian. At first Jovian declined on the grounds that he was a Christian. His troops refused to let him decline, enthusiastically declaring that they too were Christians. So the brief historical moment of an attempted return to paganism by a Roman emperor had passed and the rest of the Roman Emperors were to be Christian - in name if not in practice.

Jovian was a devout Christian and he immediately restored the privileges and status of the Christian Church that had been taken away by Julian. However, Jovian's rule was short lived, 363-64. He was succeeded by Valentinian (in the West, 364-75) and his brother Valens (in the East 364-78). Valens was an Arian Christian, like Constantius. In 378 Valens was killed in a battle with the Goths in Adrianople. In this battle, most of the Roman army was destroyed and the empire was nearly brought to its knees.

Theodosius I (379-95) - In 378, Theodosius was summoned by the emperor Gratian to serve as a general on the frontier after the humiliating defeat of Valens. After a successful campaign against the Goths, Gratian named him emperor of the East in 379. Theodosius made peace with the Goths and later defeated Maximus who, in 383, had overthrown and killed his co-emperor Gratian.

While in the West, Theodosius became a friend of St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan. With the support of Ambrose, Theodosius began in earnest to build a Christian empire. First, he enacted a series of decrees outlawing paganism and Christian heresies, especially Arianism. Pagan temples were destroyed, the pagan priesthood was abolished and Christian apostates were deprived of all civil and military honors and the right of inheritance. Civil privileges were again given to the Christian clergy, Christmas and Easter were declared legal holidays and the calendar was revised to reflect a Christian character.

Secondly, he called the First Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381. This Council ratified the Council of Nicea and modified the Nicene Creed to take on the form it has to this day. The Council was a sound defeat for Arianism, helped in part by the

Emperor's refusal to allow Arian bishops to attend the Council. Appollinarism, which denied the full humanity of Jesus, was also condemned. After the Council, Theodosius declared the Nicene/Constantinople Creed to be the orthodox creed of Christianity and more importantly in 380 he declared Christianity to be the official faith of the Roman world.

In a striking example of how the Church now influenced the Emperor, St. Ambrose excommunicated Theodosius in 390 for ordering the slaughter of some seven thousand people for civil disorder in Thessalonika. Ambrose accepted Theodosius back in the Church after he performed public penance at the door of the cathedral of Milan.

Christian Life in the Fourth Century - this is a vast subject, but only a few areas are mentioned in the text. When Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 312, probably less than five percent of the population was Christian. This figure was higher in the East than in the West because the political and cultural center of the Roman Empire now resided in the East and the early missionary efforts of Paul and others were primarily in the eastern regions of the Roman empire. Most of the population of the Empire was in the East and the great eastern cities of Alexandria and Antioch were lively centers of Christian life and study.

Monasticism -- One religious development in Christian life that was to aid the spread of Christianity from the fourth century on was monasticism. The first type of monasticism was called anchoritic, from the Greek word *anachoresis* which means "withdrawal". The anchorite monks were basically hermits who withdrew from society and usually lived solitary lives in the desert. The word monk comes from the Latin *monachus* as is a transliteration of the Greek for "one who lives alone".

St. Anthony of Egypt (251-356) is credited with being the founder of this first type of monasticism. In 269, Anthony gave away all his belongings, which included a sizable inheritance, and took up residence in vacant tomb, living on bread and water. He gathered followers and began the first Christian monastic movement. From time to time he left his solitude, once in 311 to give aid to persecuted Christians in Alexandria and another time to help St. Athanasius in his support of the Council of Nicea and in his opposition to Arianism.

Another type of monasticism developed during the fourth century and was to become known as cenobitic (communal) monasticism. Founded by St. Pachomius (290-347) this type of monasticism spread out of Egypt into the Near East with great men like St. Basil. In contrast to anchorite monasticism, cenobite monasticism was more communal and emphasized disciplined obedience. These communities lived in monasteries (Gk. *monos*, alone - "hermit's cell" or "group of protected cells"). Before his death, Pachomius had founded several monasteries and his followers were to number some seven thousand monks and nuns by the end of the century. This type of monasticism quickly spread to the Western empire.

Monasticism was to play a major role in the history of the Church. For Anthony and

Pachomius it was a reaction to and a warning that with the new situation of Christianity under Constantine, Christianity could become too cultural or secular and lose its original fervor and dedication. As time went on and the whole Empire became basically Christian, monasticism provided an option within the Church for those Christians who wanted to follow Jesus's recommendation to the rich young man "sell all you have and follow me". It also provided women a legitimate option other than marriage and a place for some to use their organizational skills in a way that participation in family life did not allow.

Later the monastic life was to be viewed as a "higher way", superior to that of the ordinary lay person. In its early days monks and nuns were highly influential in exemplary works of charity and provided a variety of social services to the poor. Importantly, for the growth of Christianity, the monks were largely responsible for preaching the Gospel and maintaining the faith of those who lived in the rural parts of the empire.

In the Middle Ages, most of the educated clergy were from the monastic orders and they would later found and/or staff the great universities. Many bishops and popes also came from the ranks of the monastic order.

Theology -- The fourth century had also seen the development of theology of the Trinity. The formulation of three Persons in one God was developed, defined and defended in the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople. These two Councils had also laid the theological groundwork for the resolution of the Christological questions which would be settled in the ecumenical councils of the next century. The great (and often competing) theological schools of Antioch and Alexandria also had their beginnings in the late fourth century.

After 350 the Latin language became the official language of the Western Church. It was the accepted language of theology and law and was universally adopted in the liturgy of the Western Church. In spite of all the linguistic diversity of the Western Church, it remained the official language of the Church until the Second Vatican Council in the middle of the twentieth century.

Church and State -- The Church of the fourth century has enjoyed great growth in numbers and prestige under the protection of the emperors. However, the imperial favor had also included imperial intervention in Church affairs, with the emperors convoking and presiding over the first two Ecumenical Councils. The relationship of Church and State would remain problematic for centuries to come.

Beginning in the fourth century, the Western empire was evolving or perhaps dissolving into small, locally governed units. The Church, with its successes in converting the "barbarians" who governed these new territories, became a powerful force for unity. Not only the emperors of the East, but also the various lords of the West had to come to terms with the influence which the Church had over their subjects. As a result, paganism was outlawed, Christian feast days became public feast days and Christian moral principles began to influence Roman law.

Chapter 7

Jerome

Our text continues to look at fourth century Christianity by devoting a chapter to the life of St. Jerome (331/40?-420). Since the eight century, Jerome has been recognized as one of the four great Doctors (teachers) of the Western Church along with Augustine, Ambrose and Gregory the Great.

Early Education -- He was born of wealthy parents in Dalmatia (Yugoslavia) and was highly educated. He spent some eight to ten years in Rome studying the classics (grammar, philosophy), including the works of the Cicero, the great first century BC Roman orator and legal scholar. While raised a Christian, it was not till his time in Rome that he accepted baptism. His life of scholarship also seemed to allow time for a social life - including sexual adventures - that he later repudiated.

Acceptance of Monasticism -- After his time in Rome, Jerome traveled extensively. He settled for a time in the important western Roman city of Trier (Germany). Here it seems he came into contact with the newly arrived monastic movement. Perhaps influenced by the monks, he began to study the Bible and theology. He also began a spiritual life of prayer and worldly detachment. Later, in the city of Aquileia, he was befriended by a priest, Chromantius, who had organized a monastic community in his home. He was deeply affected by the monastic atmosphere, but after a serious quarrel with his hosts, he departed with the intention of going to Jerusalem.

After a difficult journey through Greece and Asia Minor, exhausted and in bad health he rested at a friend's home in Antioch. While recuperating, he had a dream in which an heavenly judge accused him of being a Ciceronian rather than a Christian. After this experience, Jerome swore to put aside classical learning and devote himself entirely to a life for Christ. Thereupon he took the ascetic life of a monk for three or four years as a hermit in the desert near Antioch and devoted himself to biblical studies. He also undertook the task of learning Hebrew and became one of the few early scholars to master the language.

Writings -- In 379 Jerome was ordained a priest by Paulinus, a supporter of the formulations of the Council of Nicea against the Arians in the city of Antioch. Continuing his scholarly work, Jerome translated the famous *Chronical* of Eusebius of Caesarea, a major Christian historical work that in Jerome's translation became one of the most influential books of the Middle Ages. He also translated many of the homilies of the noted theologian Origen (185-254) and was greatly influenced by Origen's writings, some of which were later declared heretical -- preexistence of souls, reincarnation, the salvation of all souls (including the devil) and bodiless resurrected state.

In 382 Jerome went into the service of Pope Damasus who enlisted him to revise the Old Latin Bible which included a translation of the OT from the Greek Septuagint Bible

(LXX) rather than from the Hebrew. Later Jerome gave up his attempt to simply revise the Old Latin Bible and translated the entire OT directly from the Hebrew and thus produce his most famous work, the Latin Vulgate Bible. The new renderings found in the Vulgate were met with a great deal of protest and the entire enterprise was even criticized by St. Augustine as “unnecessary”. Jerome only translated the Gospels of the NT, the remaining books of the NT included in The Vulgate are probably the works of his disciple Rufinus completed early in the fifth century.

While still in the service of Pope Damasus, Jerome made the acquaintance of a wealthy lady aristocrat named Paula and her daughter Eustochium. Paula and some of her women friends lived a life of seclusion, dedicated to celibacy, asceticism and prayer. Jerome became their spiritual director and mentor and a close personal friend of Paula.

During this time Jerome composed several treatises on the ascetic life, extolling virginity as the highest state of Christian life while the married life and sexual intercourse were viewed as the results of original sin. Many of his writing on this subject were crude and regarded as extreme by many of his contemporaries. One such critic was a man named Helvidius who, in defense of conjugal life, held that after the birth of Jesus, Mary continued with a normal married life. Thus Helvidius denied the perpetual virginity of Mary. Jerome reacted in a violent treatise, *Against Helvidius*. Eventually the arguments in this treatise would establish for all time the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. His elevation of celibacy over marriage was also to have lasting effects on Christian spirituality and sexual ethics. These would later be reinforced by Augustine.

Later, Jerome penned a pamphlet entitled *Against Vigilantius* which defended the growing customs of the veneration of relics, burning candles and keeping vigils at the shrines of martyrs and other saints, and prayers of intercession directed to the saints. These practices received a boost in their popularity by the positive theological support given by Jerome.

Jerome in the Holy Land -- On the death of Damasus in 384, critics of Jerome in Rome became quite vocal and as a result Jerome and later Paula accompanied by her daughter quit Rome to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They toured the holy places and took a special interest in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

In 386, after a brief visit to some monks in Egypt, Jerome, Paula and Eustochium returned to Bethlehem where Jerome decided to establish a monastery based on the model of the monasteries established by his friends, Rufinus and Melania, in the city of Jerusalem. These monasteries were designed separately for men and women who were Latin-speaking ascetics. These monasteries adopted a life-style based on the *Rule* of St. Pachomius of Egypt. This rule called for a common life, sharing meals and regular times of prayer. They were partially supported by their own manual labor. This type of Latin-style monasticism laid the groundwork for the transportation of monasticism to the Roman west in the fifth century.

During the next thirty years until his death, Jerome continued his writings. He finished his translation of the Bible, translated theological works and wrote *Famous Men*, a historical outline of Christian writings.

Jerome in Controversy -- From all accounts, Jerome did not fit the stereotype of a quiet, prayerful monk. He was involved in several controversies that brought out his darker side -- intolerance, bigotry, temper tantrums, violent and nasty assaults on his "enemies".

Jerome reacts to Origenism -- Jerome entered into a friendship-ending controversy with his life long friend Rufinus, who had established the monasteries in Jerusalem. Jerome had complained about the somewhat relaxed life style of Rufinus' monasteries and Rufinus in turn had rebuked Jerome for his audacity in translating a new edition of the Bible.

However, the real controversy centered around their early theological master Origen. As mentioned earlier, some of Origen's teachings and some teachings questionably attributed to Origen had been condemned under the title "Origenism". Jerome complained that Rufinus and his bishop, John of Jerusalem were helping to spread the heresies of Origen. In 397, John excommunicated Jerome and tried to forcefully expel him from his diocese.

Rufinus went to live in Rome and from there translated Origen's chief work, *First Principles*. In the preface to this translation, Rufinus indicated that Jerome had been an early disciple of Origen. Jerome retaliated in various pamphlets filled with scorn and abuse. Rufinus died in 411 without the two old friends being reconciled.

Jerome also got involved in the middle of a quarrel between Theophilus, the patriarch of Alexandria and John Chrysostom the patriarch of Constantinople. Theophilus wanted to humiliate the rival see of Constantinople by having Chrysostom deposed. The saintly Chrysostom had preached against the rampant vice in Constantinople and had alienated many of the populace and their clergy. Thus, in 403 Theophilus, aided by Jerome, brought Chrysostom to "trial" at the Synod of Oak and condemned him on twenty-nine charges related to Origenism. Chrysostom was exiled briefly to Bithynia and finally banished to Pontus where he died when, in ill health, he was compelled by his guards to march under the hot sun. Jerome had helped to bring these events to pass.

Jerome and Augustine -- Initially, Jerome had a difficult relationship with Augustine. The younger Augustine had contacted Jerome for some theological advice. In the ongoing discourse, Augustine had criticized some of Jerome's opinions and, like Rufinus, had questioned the need for Jerome to replace the Old Latin Bible with one translated from the Hebrew. Augustine noted that the Septuagint was considered inspired and therefore the Old Latin Bible should suffice.

Naturally Jerome reacted to this criticism in his customary acid fashion and only later, after profuse apologies and profuse praise by Augustine, did they finally become friends

with scholarly respect for each other.

Jerome and Augustine did join forces in opposing the views of an ascetic theologian, Pelagius (350-425) who taught in Rome. Pelagius was reacting to Manichaeism, a Gnostic theology that taught that matter was evil and humans were formed by “rulers of Darkness” and thus procreation is of demonic origin.

Pelagius stressed the goodness of mankind and his freedom and ability to do good and avoid evil. This God-given freedom is actually a “grace” and therefore no special supernatural grace is needed for humans to do good. He seemed to assert that humans had the power to save themselves by good works without any supernatural help. Later disciples would be condemned for teaching that infants were sinless prior to baptism. This was in direct contradiction to Augustine’s opinion that all humans are born in original sin and that unbaptized babies who died went to Hell. In 413 Jerome attacked Pelagius and, in 415, Augustine attacked these ideas in his treatise *On Nature and Grace*.

Jerome would live to see vast changes in the Western Empire as the formation of “barbarian” states was in full swing. In 416, he also had to leave his monastery in Jerusalem which was attacked by unknown persons, perhaps followers of Pelagius. Jerome probably died in 421 and was buried in Jerusalem, near the Church of the Nativity and close to the tombs of Paula and Eustochium.

History records Jerome’s accomplishments to include his translation of the OT from Hebrew, his contribution to mariology, the promotion of monasticism and his many theological and biblical writings. Despite his famous “dark side”, he was declared Saint and later Doctor of the Church.