

This article by E. P. Wixted was published in THE CLARION, 30 July 1954.

The diagram that accompanied this article is posted on this website as a separate document:
The Credentials of the Roman Church.

A CAMEO OF HISTORY

This article and accompanying diagram are based upon the following authorities: — Roman Catholic Encyclopaedia, Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," Farrar's "Lives of the Fathers," McCabe's "History of the Popes," H.G. Wells' "Outline of History" and "Crux Ansata," and "The History of the World" by W.N. Weech. Where I have found a concise analysis I have not laboured to affect a paraphrase. Readers will strike familiar phrases and sentences, particularly in the section dealing with "Papal Succession," where I have borrowed liberally from Joseph McCabe's History. — E. P. Wixted

The early years of the Roman Church are shrouded in mystery and traditional legend. It is the purpose of this disquisition to examine in the light of history the claims of the Papacy regarding the events of the years when Christianity, as the term is generally understood today, was in its formative phases.

The foundations of the Roman Empire were laid in 753 BC, when a Latin tribe settled in some small hills on the southern bank of the Tiber 15 miles from the river's mouth. A fortunate geographical position aided the fairly rapid development of Rome, but in the course of several centuries she found a rival to her growing prosperity in the North African city of Carthage. Eventually, in a dispute over Sicily, war broke out between the rival cities in 264 BC. After a century or more of spasmodic fighting Rome emerged victorious.

In an endeavour to maintain her security Rome turned her face towards the East. This theatre of the Mediterranean had witnessed a procession of Empires, which, commencing with the Assyrian of 700 BC, and terminating with the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great, passed through a phase of Babylonian and Medo-Persian supremacy in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The name of Greece was written in the annals of conquest by the military genius of Alexander, but the Greeks won victories of more importance than those of the battle-field. Her armies diffused her learning and her language throughout, and even beyond, the countries which acknowledged the rule of Greek kings.

Almost imperceptibly, as Rome's influence in their domestic affairs increased, these countries became protectorates, and eventually provinces, of the Roman Empire. In 31 BC the last of the Greek Kingdoms, Egypt, fell firmly into the hands of Rome. Roman eagles fluttered in the breezes which blew upon the British Isles, France, Carthage, Egypt, Palestine, and Asia Minor. Rome had made of the world a city. In an age of religious toleration Rome had become the common temple of her subjects, and the freedom of the city was bestowed on all the gods of mankind.

While the functions of government had been centralised, its form had varied considerably. But in 27 BC when Augustus became the first of the Roman Emperors, a new form of government commenced which lasted until the collapse of the pagan empire. The union of the provinces was cemented by the influence of laws and manners. Latin became the common tongue of government and of the West; but the Greeks of the East had too much taste and too much national pride to adopt any foreign institutions (or) to relinquish their language.

ROME UNDER THE EMPERORS

Until the time of Augustus, the Senate governed the republic of Rome, but with the advent of the emperors, it came to possess only nominal authority. The supreme powers of the state passed into the hands of the emperors who became the masters, not only of the temporal

government, but of the state religion as well. The emperors were acknowledged both as the "Fathers" of their country, and as the "Supreme Pontiffs" of the pagan religion.

There were three factors which facilitated the decline of the pagan Roman Empire. Firstly, a satisfactory method of determining the succession was never found, and the bloody disputes which determined who should wear the purple undermined the strength of the empire. Secondly, the state religion which had at one time helped to bind the provinces became the source of corrupted loyalties and internecine strife. The third major factor was the invasion of the declining empire by the hordes of barbarians who hovered on her frontiers.

The following brief outline should be sufficient to dispel the popular but fallacious idea that Roman Emperors did very little except persecute Christians. We may conveniently trace out Roman history in the pattern provided by five successive groups of emperors: Julian and Claudian (27 BC–68 AD); Flavian (68–96 AD); Adoptive (96–193); the "Barracks" emperors, appointed by the army (193–248); and the Theologian Emperors (330 AD onwards).

Hereditary succession is the simplest method of determining who shall wield the supreme power, but in the Roman Empire this proved abortive. The dynasty established by Augustus introduced an age of iron. The cruel Tiberius was succeeded by the insane Gaius, who was in turn succeeded by the feeble Claudius. The suicide of the profligate and cruel Nero brought the first dynasty to an end. Within a year there were four new emperors, each of whom disposed of his predecessor by battle or murder. After these civil wars Vespasian restored stable government in his 10 years' reign. The second Imperial dynasty which he founded, after passing to his son Titus, ended in disaster with the broody and sombre Domitian. Except perhaps for the reign of Vespasian, the empire had groaned beneath an unrelenting tyranny for 80 years.

The Senate elected the next emperor, Nerva. Very little was accomplished in his short reign, but he founded a new method for determining succession – that of "adoption." This method proved successful, and the period of the Adoptive Emperors (98–180) is regarded by historians as the brightest and most benevolent in the human chronicle until modern time. Of the four emperors of this period, Trajan and Hadrian came from Spain, and Antoninus and M. Aurelius from Gaul.

Unfortunately, Marcus Aurelius had a son, and the principle of hereditary succession re-established itself. Roman history enters a troubled period. The cruelty and follies of Commodus ended only when he was strangled. When his successor, Pertinax, attempted to carry out reforms he was assassinated by a body of troops, the Praetorian Guards, who were beginning to take matters into their own hands. Before a civil war placed the African Septimus Severus on the throne, this same body of troops publicly sold the Empire – perhaps we should say the position as head of the Empire – to Didius, who was, however, beheaded in the same year, 193 AD.

The sons of Severus – Caracalla and Geta – were associated in the purple with their father, and the Roman world beheld three emperors for the first time. Shortly after the death of Severus in 211, Geta was assassinated at the instigation of Caracalla, who was himself assassinated in 217 AD. Elagabalus, a Syrian, became the first Roman Emperor of Asiatic extraction. After a reign of inexpressible infamy, where every law of nature and decency was subverted, and every vice that could be collected from the conflux of nations and manners gratified, he was killed by the troops and his body thrown into the Tiber after being dragged through the streets. Since the accession of Commodus the Roman world experienced during 40 years the successive and various vices of four tyrants. From the death of Elagabalus it enjoyed during the reign of Alexander Severus an auspicious calm of 13 years.

Alexander was murdered in 235 AD, and the army then elevated Maximin, a giant of a man. Of barbarian descent, he was the first Roman emperor who possessed no literary education. Maximin is accused of "persecuting Christians" but it is apparent that the destruction of Christians attached to the court of his predecessor was only incidental to a wider destruction

of those who had previously possessed authority or Imperial favour, or who were aware of his original obscurity. Maximin never revisited Italy, except to fight his last battle.

The history of the half-century from Maximin to Diocletian (235–284) is a tale of almost continual civil war and of barbarian powers who availed themselves of the opportunity to invade and plunder. Nineteen men wore the Imperial purple during these 50 years; many others made a bid for the throne. The most obvious cause of these troubles was the lack of a satisfactory solution to the problem of determining the succession. Force became the only road to the throne.

Maximin was killed by his own troops after a revolt which commenced in Carthage and spread to Italy. Gordianus came and went.

Rome passed the milestone of her 1,000th anniversary during the reign of Philip the Arab. The first 400 years had seen the growth of military skill and the trial of various forms of government. The Empire had been established during the next 300 years. The last 300 years (53 BC–248 AD) witnessed an internal decline. While the boundaries of the empire were not diminished during this latter period, the animating vigour of former times had departed.

The mantle of authority next fell upon the uneasy shoulders of Decius, Gallus and Valerian. Decius published an edict which required all persons to subscribe to the pagan state religion. After a short but turbulent reign, Decius fell in battle with the barbarians. Valerian imitated the severity of Decius after an initial period of clemency. He died in 260 AD and in the next year his son and former co-emperor Gallienus published an edict of toleration which made Christianity a licensed religion in the empire.

The death of Gallienus in 268 concluded 20 years of shame and misfortune for the empire. There had been 19 pretenders to the throne during his reign, and of these not one enjoyed a life of peace or a natural death. A general irruption of barbarians – Franks, Alemanni, Goths and Persians – tested the fibre of Roman generals. While Valerian and Gallienus had been engaged in distant wars a numerous body of Alemanni penetrated Italy until almost within sight of Rome.

Within the next period of 30 years the Empire was saved from the mighty assembly of barbarian nations by a series of great princes. Claudius, Aurelian, Tacitus, Probus, Carus, Diocletian, and his colleagues, re-established the strength of the frontiers and deserved the glorious title of Restorers of the Roman world. The elevation of the aged Tacitus restored to a certain extent the prestige of the senate, but its temporary resurgence expired with Probus.

Like Augustus, Diocletian may be considered as the founder of a new empire. He divided the empire into two – the East and the West – and associated Maximian with him in the purple. He then subdivided his own and his colleague's powers by appointing two generals with inferior titles. Thus he provided for the defence of the empire. Notwithstanding precautions, the political union of the Roman world was gradually dissolved and a principle of division was introduced, which, in the course of a few years, occasioned the perpetual separation of the eastern and western empires.

Diocletian and Maximian abdicated together, and during the next 18 years of discord and confusion there were five civil wars. The possibility of finding four rulers prepared to work together harmoniously for the sake of the empire receded. Favourites were elevated, and at one stage there were six emperors at the same time. It was left to Constantine to hew his bloody path to the throne and reunite the empire.

Up to this time the religion of the people and the religion of the emperor had been moving steadily closer and closer together. They amalgamated in the person of Constantine, who became the first of the "Theologian" emperors. Constantine bequeathed to his successors a

new policy, a new capital, and a new religion. Shortly before he established Constantinople as the new capital, he called together the First General Theological Council. Held at Nicaea in Asia Minor in 325 AD, this council marked the beginning of the fusion of church and state, with theological Christianity shortly to become the state religion. All the great councils of subsequent years, the two at Constantinople (381 and 553), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), were called together by the Imperial power.

The conclusion of Constantine's reign served only to degrade him. It is certain that he was guilty of the judicial murder of some of his own family. When he died in 337 the Empire was divided between his three remaining sons. Two of these – Constantine II and Constans – died violently, and within 13 years Constantius reigned supreme. He impressed Arianism on the Empire as the sanctioned form of Christianity.

Of the numerous seed of the Royal line of Constantine, one other, (Julian) by this time survived. Only because of the death of Constantius, Julian assumed the purple without recourse to civil war in 362 AD. He was a pagan emperor who had won renown by his victories over the barbarians of the Rhine. By extending toleration to all persons he hoped to foment the intestine divisions of the church. The clergy he deprived of many of the privileges, which, since the time of Constantine they were coming to regard as their right.

Julian was killed in an expedition against the Persians, and his successor, Jovian, for apparently personal reasons, terminated the war by accepting disgraceful terms from the Persians. In his short reign Jovian managed to restore ecclesiastical immunities. On his death, Valentinian assumed the purple and immediately nominated his brother Valens as co-emperor in 364 AD, and they divided the empire between them. Valentinian expired in a burst of fury at an imaginary barbarian insult in 375; Valens was burnt to death when the Roman forces were routed by the Goths at Adrianople in 378.

The division of the Empire was perpetuated by their successors, Gratian and Valentinian II. On their untimely deaths Theodosius restored and reunited the Empire. Of Nicene persuasion – he was responsible for the massacre of between 7,000 and 15,000 people at Thessalonica, so the term Christian, however elastic, seems peculiarly inappropriate – he made his faith the religion of the empire. The pagan temples were destroyed and an edict was published against Arians in 381 AD. When he established the office of "Inquisitors of the Faith" it was clear that the Christian sectaries, who had for so long complained of the intolerance of the secular arm, were not prepared, when in the same position of authority, to extend the principle of religious toleration.

Theodosius died in 395 and the Empire was finally divided between his sons Honorius and Arcadius, who became tools in the hands of their leading ministers and generals. The Goths had been quietened by Theodosius, but after his death they progressed from Danube to Italy under the leadership of Alaric. The great general of the West, Stilicho, was executed by his own emperor, and the way was prepared for the Gothic invasion. Alaric besieged Rome (at this time Ravenna was the capital of the West) in 408 and 409, finally conquering and sacking it in 410.

Gradually Spain, France and the British Islands began breaking away. Vandals invaded Africa from Spain in 429, and with the taking of Carthage in 439 they destroyed not only Latin civilisation, but (also) the Latin church, in North Africa. Under their apparently ageless leader Genseric, the Vandals sacked Rome in 455. At the same time the Huns under Attila attacked northern Italy.

From the double humiliation of Attila's invasion and the Vandal sack of Rome, the Western Empire never recovered. Emperor succeeded emperor with distressing rapidity. The long line of emperors in the West came to an end with Augustulus, and Italy passed under the rule of a barbarian king, Odovacar in 476.

Except for the church there was nothing stable left in the West.

THE BIBLE IN RELATION TO THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

At the crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, wrote a super-scription above the cross. The three languages which he employed – Hebrew, Latin and Greek – illustrate the pattern of church development. The original scripture, the Old Testament, was written in Hebrew between 1450 and 400 BC. It was translated into Greek in Alexandria between 285 and 150 BC. This Septuagint translation, which was the mother version of all Gentile translations until the fifth century, was marred by a number of incorrect renderings.

The writings which comprise the New Testament were, with one exception, (the Gospel of Matthew), written in Greek between 50 and 100 AD. When subsequently these writings were collected into one they fell into place naturally in the Greek Bible. Between 100 and 200 AD there were several fresh translations from Hebrew into Greek.

The first Latin version of which we have knowledge circulated in North Africa about 200 AD. Faulty Latin versions multiplied until Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome to make a new rendering from the original languages. The resultant translation – the Latin Vulgate – was completed about 404.

The order of church development was conditioned by the availability of the scriptures in the common tongue. The Bible passed from Hebrew to Greek and thence into Latin, and the churches developed in similar order. The Latin churches in the centuries when they were without the authoritative word, relied a great deal upon unauthoritative and wholly unreliable tradition.

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

As the teachings of Christianity spread through Asia Minor and beyond, numerous and wealthy societies were established in the great cities – in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth, Carthage, and Rome. Towards the close of the second century the growth of churches made it necessary to form dioceses. A regular correspondence served to unite the various congregations, and the universal church soon acquired the status of a confederate republic. The overseer of the congregation assumed the role of bishop, a division between people and priests developed, and a form of hierarchical government was introduced.

The leading teachers or writers who fathered the Christian church in its infancy became known, logically enough, as the “Fathers of the Church.” The Greek fathers and scholars far outnumber the Latin, and ante-date them considerably. If the reader will examine the diagram he will see that the only intellectual leaders of any consequence in the Roman Church up to 400 AD – Hippolytus and Novatian – were both anti-popes, and that the true fathers of Latin Christendom came from Carthage, not Rome. Far from Rome being the “mother church” she was herself the offspring of the mating of the Greek fathers with the Carthaginian form of Latin Christianity.

The term Pope was a common title of bishops until the 5th century. Meaning “father” the term “papa” appears to have been first used at Alexandria, then at Carthage, later by the Romans. It remained a common title in the East, but the destruction of the Western Empire by the barbarians left no bishop of importance in Europe to dispute the Roman bishops' monopoly of the title.

The Roman Church may lay claim to have had a continual line of “popes,” but the indisputable testimony of history is that in the formative phases of Christianity (50-350 AD) there is not a single Roman Father.

PERSECUTION

There were three emperors involved in the persecution of Christians – Nero in 68 AD; Decius in 250 AD; and Diocletian in 284 AD.

While Nero put a considerable number of Greek-speaking Christians to death as a matter of expediency after the Great Fire of Rome, the religious tenets of the sect were never made a subject of punishment or even of inquiry. Forty years afterwards, in 112 AD, there had still been no action of sufficient weight and authority directed against the Christians to establish a precedent for the conduct of a Roman Magistrate. Pliny, the Magistrate, concerned, appealed to Rome for guidance as the attitude he should adopt towards the Christian sectaries. While Nero employed many ghastly methods, no Christian was ever put to death in the Roman amphitheatre (arena). Father Delehaye, a Roman Catholic investigator, has confirmed the impartial judgement of most historians on this matter.

The Roman community enjoyed more than 150 years of almost unbroken peace from the death of Domitian (who is not known to have put any to death) to the accession of Decius (96-250 AD). To 247 AD (so we are assured by the learned father, Origen of Alexandria) the number of martyrs were “few and easily counted”. Decius directed his persecution mainly at the church leaders, and in his reign we find the first genuine martyrdom of a Roman Bishop, Fabianus. J. A. F. Gregg has made a special study of this persecution, and has found “the names of, at most, SIX Christians who met their death at Rome in the Decian persecution.” What is more, the next Pope, Cornelius, boasted immediately afterwards of the numerical strength and organisation of his church!

The persecution by Diocletian commenced at Nicomedia. It is estimated by the historian Gibbon that 2,000 died throughout the Empire in the period of 10 years persecution. But the church historian, Eusebius, writing in 324 AD, laid a great portion of the blame at the door of the church itself. After noting the honourable offices enjoyed by certain Christians, he explains how, in the church itself, prelate had risen against prelate, and “hypocrisy and dissimulation had arisen to the greatest height of malignity.” It is not for him (he says) to describe the sorrowful calamities of the persecution “neither does it belong to me to record the dissensions and follies which they exercised against each other before the persecution.” (Ecclesiastical Hist. Book 8).

When Pope Marcellus imposed penance on Christians who had defected, the rage of faction broke out in frequent and violent seditions, and “the blood of the faithful was shed by each other’s hands.” (Gibbon). At a later stage when Christianity had become the state religion a similar shedding of blood occurred in a faction fight between Ursicinus and Damasus for the bishopric of Rome in 366. On that occasion between 137 and 160 bodies littered the field of battle, formerly the meeting place of the Christians.

The discerning reader, recalling the character of some of the emperors, might harbour a prejudice of a sustained persecution. But the indisputable testimony of history is that, to 330 AD, the emperors who favoured the Christians were, with one exception, the most infamous of the Imperial line. In all the persecutions the provincial cities fared far worse than Rome.

In conclusion let me add a few words on the scholars and fathers of the Church. There were no Roman fathers before Jerome in 400 AD. Hermas and Caius were minor writers. Novatian and Hippolytus were anti-popes. Irenaeus was a Greek-speaking missionary bishop in France. After Jerome, Hilary of Poitiers was a historian and writer, Martin of Tours the father of Western Monasticism, and Ambrose of Milan the great bishop of the period. At the same time Carthage was adorned by Tertullian, Cyprian, Minucius Felix, Lactantius and Augustine, who all made a definite impression in ecclesiastical history.

Greek writers commenced with “apologists” of lesser importance. Alexandria cradled Pantaenus, Clement, Origen, Dionysius, Arius, Athanasius, Didymus, and at a later age Cyril.

The Greek provinces provided Hegesippus (responsible for the first pope-list), Justyn Martyr, Dionysius of Corinth, and Gregory Thaumaturgus. Eusebius of Caesarea fathered church history. His namesake in Nicomedia was a great bishop of the period. Then followed the great Greek fathers – Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and the 'golden-mouthed' orator, John Chrysostom. The figures in brackets after the names on the diagram indicate columns in the Roman Catholic Encyclopaedia. Compare with column three.

When you have done that, you will have completed your examination of the credentials of the Roman Church. Perhaps now you will realise why the Roman church is hardly mentioned in church history for the first two centuries, and why, when Jerome, (saint and scholar), listed 136 ecclesiastical writers, about 400 AD, he found room on the list for the names of only four Roman bishops.

The diagram referred to in the above article is posted on this website as a separate document — ***The Credentials of the Roman Church.***