

sacred scriptures that could be found, so as to produce a standard edition of the Bible that could be used throughout the Church. The Pope, whose secretary he had been, commissioned him to undertake this work. St Jerome's Latin translation, which has come to be known as the Vulgate edition, has been used ever since.

The Bible had taken centuries to come into existence as one book. Naturally, its various books had circulated along with many others, some more and some less reliable, in the world of the early Christians. Certain books were selected as being divinely inspired and worthy to be read during Mass. These lists of reliable texts became the Bible as we know it today. In 393 St Augustine presided over a synod in North Africa that settled the list of books to be regarded as Sacred Scripture. Eleven years later Pope St Innocent I confirmed the list.

**CHRISTIANITY HAD SHOWN THAT IT COULD ADAPT WONDERFULLY FROM BEING AN URBAN PERSECUTED RELIGION TO BECOME THE CIVILISER OF WHOLE NATIONS.**

This was the age of the great missionaries who went forth into countries where until then there were no Christians. Without support, without language or defence, and by the grace of God alone, they won

new peoples for Christ. St Patrick, a British escaped slave, performed amazing feats, converting the whole nation of the Irish and establishing monasteries which would send out waves of intrepid monks to re-Christianise Europe. Ireland became known as the isle of saints and scholars. When scholarship declined on the continent, Irish monks travelled to Italy to re-teach Latin to the Italians. On the other hand, Pope St Gregory the Great in 596 sent Italian monks from Rome, led by St Augustine of Canterbury (as he became known), to convert the English. Their mission was a great success and English monks went on to convert Holland and Germany. Christianity had shown that it could adapt wonderfully from being an urban persecuted religion to become the civiliser of whole nations.

In the Vatican apartments in Rome there is a beautiful fresco on one of the ceilings entitled "The Triumph of Christianity". It shows a very grand classical basilica, full of columns and arches and polished marble. In the centre of all this is a pedestal and on it stands a beautiful gold crucifix. At the base of the pedestal is the smashed idol of a pagan god. It is a reminder of the incredible feat by which Christianity conquered the Roman empire. We have forgotten how immense and terrifying the pagan Roman empire was and how savage its persecutions were. Through it all the Church not only survived but grew, never shedding others' blood in her own defence, but trusting in the protecting power of the Lord. That protection never failed her. Nor can it fail us, of course, until Christ returns, whenever that may be. And who is to say whether we ourselves may not be the early Church?

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What struck you the most about the life of the early Church?
2. Why do you think the Church not only survived but actually grew during the persecutions?
3. If the Church were persecuted in Australia today as it was in the first centuries, how do you think Catholics would react?

<sup>1</sup> St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 4, quoted in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, Radice, B. (ed.) Penguin Books 1987, p.86  
<sup>2</sup> St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8, quoted in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, Radice, B. (ed.) Penguin Books 1987, p.103

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St Anthony of Egypt  
Iconic Representation

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**THE EARLY CHURCH**

In our concern for the present-day situation in the life of the Church, we tend to forget that the Church has been in existence for almost 2000 years. In this article **Fr Anthony Robbie** opens our eyes to the life of the early Christians.

The Early Church

It is still amazing after all this time to imagine how a small religious movement in far-off Palestine managed to captivate the whole Roman world, a world which had tried everything to exterminate it. Christianity must have seemed a very frail and unlikely prospect in those first few years after our Lord's ascension.

The Christians, as they were soon to be called, were few in number and greatly persecuted. They had no churches and very little in the way of resources, but they had a system of organisation bequeathed to them by Christ and the sustenance of the Holy Spirit. At first they met in the synagogue on Saturday to follow the Jewish faith, and the next day, the Lord's Day, they gathered for the Christian Eucharist. The Jewish communities across the Roman world became the channel by which Christianity spread so quickly through the empire. In every great city there were Jews, and the apostles found a ready-made audience to whom the teaching of Christ would make sense.

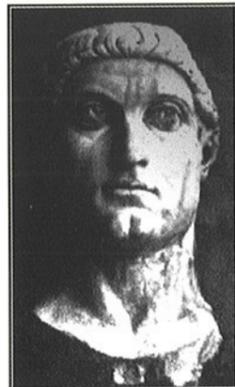
They explained Christ's fulfilment of the prophecies of the Messiah. They told of the new hope that had been given by Christ's saving death and they explained the triumph of the resurrection. Naturally, while many accepted this new teaching, many others did not. Before the end of the first century, moreover, the Christians had been expelled from the synagogue.

**THE PERSECUTIONS**

To the hostility of the Jews was added the persecution by the Roman authorities. They feared this new sect and resented the high moral code it preached. The Romans declared Christian gatherings illegal and ordered all people to venerate pagan idols. If they refused they could have their property confiscated or even be put to death. History shows us inspiring examples of heroic figures who would not deny their faith despite the worst threats and cruelty of their enemies. They came from every walk of life.

Pope St Sixtus II was caught in the catacombs saying Mass near the tombs of the saints and was beheaded at once. Sts Perpetua and Felicity, one a young Christian woman, the other not yet baptised, met their death in the arena, killed by animals for the entertainment of a savage crowd. The aged bishop, St Polycarp, a disciple of St John the evangelist himself, was burned alive before another mob. Little St Agnes, only twelve years old, suffered a violent death rather than deny the faith.

St Ignatius of Antioch, successor of St Peter as bishop of that city, has an extraordinary documentary record in



Bust of Constantine 4th Century

seven letters he wrote to the Christians of various cities while being taken to Rome to be thrown to the lions in the arena. He writes movingly and tenderly of his coming death: "I am his wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ."<sup>1</sup> In fact, his letters are full of Eucharistic imagery. He instructs his readers to be loyal and respectful to their bishops, priests and deacons, to show reverence for the Mass and to avoid all disunity. And all this in the year 107 AD! He writes: "Follow your bishop, every one of you, as obediently as Jesus Christ followed the Father. Obey your clergy too, as you would the Apostles; give your deacons the same reverence that you would to a command from God. Make sure that no step affecting the Church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop's sanction...Where the bishop is to be seen, there let all his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present, we have the catholic church."<sup>2</sup>

**DEFENDING AND SPREADING THE FAITH**

In the second and third centuries a class of learned Christians grew up who tried to defend Christians against the malice of pagan persecution by explaining the faith and defusing the false stories that had been spread about it. They were known as the apologists and included such well known figures as St Justin, Tertullian and Minucius Felix. The apologists conducted debates with pagan orators and even wrote to the emperors, explaining that Christians were their most loyal citizens, that they meant no-one any harm and had been misrepresented.

Christians took the business of instruction of converts very seriously in those days. They made use of a process known as the catechumenate, by which pagans were instructed in the faith before receiving Baptism. It might last two years and during that time the candidates were examined for their knowledge and practice as well as for the uprightness of their lives. Finally they were admitted to Baptism, which was conferred principally, but not exclusively, at the vigils of Easter and Pentecost. What a great moment had arrived when the catechumens, who previously were allowed to attend only the Liturgy of the Word at Mass, were now able to be present for the Liturgy of the Eucharist and to receive their divine Lord for the first time!

It must be remembered that the practice of Penance was much more strictly applied than in our own day. For a while it was a sacrament which might be only once, lest people devalue it. Hence it was off, along with even Baptism, until their

PEOPLE OF EVERY PROFESSION AND SOCIAL CLASS WERE DRAWN TO THE NOBLE AND INSPIRING TRUTHS OF CHRISTIANITY.

death bed. Confession of public sins had to be done publicly, in the church before the priest, who would absolve publicly, while the people prayed for the sincere repentance of the penitent. He or she would then receive a public penance and might have to stand at the back of the church, in the

area reserved for public sinners, until the time of the penance was concluded. No less a person than the Emperor Theodosius submitted to this discipline when his friend St Ambrose

imposed it on him in 390 AD. What a wonderful spectacle of humility and obedience to God it must have been to see the Roman Emperor himself standing at the back of the cathedral in Milan, wearing not the grand robes of his office, but the humble dress of a penitent.

By that stage, of course, Christianity was no longer the frightened persecuted sect it had been for most of its history until then. By the beginning of the fourth century, about twenty percent of the empire had been converted to Christianity. In the beginning its members were to be found largely among the middle classes of the cities. It remained an urban religion for most of those early centuries.

Nevertheless, people of every profession and social class were drawn to the noble and inspiring truths of Christianity. In the year 96 AD the Emperor Domitian put to death his own cousin, the senator Flavius Clement, for adherence to the faith. On the other hand, Pope St Callixtus had formerly been a slave. Merchants, artists, slaves, soldiers – anyone might become a Christian and all were treated equally in the sight of God. The Christians acquired an enviable reputation for their charity and fraternal love, moving even the pagans to declare: "See how these Christians love one another".

The virtuous example of lived Christianity was a very powerful force for evangelisation. People saw the way Christians lived and wanted to be like them. Little by little, Christianity started to attract converts from the higher reaches of society. The literate, the influential, the deep thinkers saw in the new faith the answer to the weaknesses of the pagan world. Often the very best elements in society were being drawn to the faith and were explaining themselves in the most eloquent and articulate way.

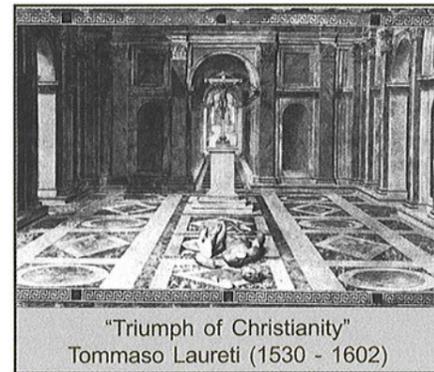
**THE END OF THE PERSECUTIONS**

The last real persecution was also the worst, that of the emperor Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 305 AD. In a series of edicts beginning

in 303, the emperor instituted a reign of terror on his Christian subjects from one end of the empire to the other that lasted well beyond his resignation in 305. When it was over, the Christians had suffered terribly, but they had survived.

In the civil war which followed his reign, one of the contending leaders, Constantine, son of a Christian mother, St Helena, saw in the sky a

vision of the Cross, with the words "In this sign you shall conquer". This moved him to have the Chi-Rho Christian monogram painted on the shields of his soldiers. Even though most of his soldiers were pagans, and even though he himself seems to have been a pagan at this stage, he attributed to the protection of God the great victory he won that year (312 AD) in the battle of the Milvian



"Triumph of Christianity" Tommaso Laureti (1530 - 1602)

bridge. The next year, with the Edict of Milan, Christianity was legalised throughout the empire and a new chapter opened in the life of the Church.

Constantine favoured Christianity, while recognising that it was still a minority faith in a pagan empire. He had great churches built in the Holy Land, in his new capital of Constantinople and in Rome itself, where he went to great lengths to construct the vast basilica of St Peter's over the exact grave site of the apostle. Constantine made Sunday a public holiday and had the Christian monogram, the Chi-Rho, inscribed on the coinage of the empire. He interested himself in matters of theology and Church government. The Church had never had such a protector, but she would have to guard herself so that the protector of the Church did not become her master.

**COMBATING HERESIES**

No sooner had the Church freed herself from the persecution of external foes, than she found internal divisions to distract her. From the beginning, as seen clearly in the writings of St Paul, there had been a tendency among Christians to form factions and insist upon novelties in doctrine which had nothing to do with the religion Christ had bequeathed to the apostles. Every possible outlandish proposition was argued by someone in those early days, but the weight of compelling argument and the common tradition of the faith saw off all threats to the unity of the Church's belief.

Some had said that it was necessary to hold all the old Jewish practices, such as circumcision, ablutions and abstaining from certain foods, in the new Christianity (Ebionites). Others maintained that there was an evil god, who had created the material world, to balance the good one, who had

created the spiritual world (dualists such as the Manichaeans). Some, the Gnostics, claimed all manner of extraordinary, and ultimately pagan doctrines had been secretly communicated to them by Christ, although they, unlike the Catholics, could show no connection to Christ whatsoever.

As people pondered the faith their knowledge of it increased and differences of opinion in its explanation appeared. One thing is most important to consider. Whenever the early Christians had to settle a question of doctrine, they never asked the sort of questions that sometimes occur to us – "What is the most convenient thing to believe?" "What do most people want?" "What will unite the warring factions most effectively, or is

there a compromising form of words that will paper over a real difference?" On the contrary, the only question that was ever asked was "What did our fathers believe?" In other words, "What has the Church believed from the beginning?" Recourse was always made to precedent and tradition.

What is more, some sees were held to have more authority in judging disputed doctrine than others. The apostles had established the Church in some of the great centres of the empire and had communicated their mind and teachings to their disciples in those cities. Thus a living tradition, almost a living mind was to be found in some places so that people would, for example, submit a query to Rome, asking not "What do the Romans think of this?" but "What does Peter think of this?" In ancient times the four patriarchal sees of Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch and Alexandria stood at the forefront of the Christian world. But Rome was always at their head, both as capital of the empire and as the inheritor of the faith of the two princes of the apostles, Sts Peter and Paul, who had established the Church in that dangerous city and had given their lives there.

The greatest disputes, and those which have had the most impact on our own time, concerned the person of Christ himself. One problem was always to return. How could Jesus be both fully man and fully God? Surely he must be one or the other. Some taught that he was so much God that his humanity was merely a pretence (Docetists). Others taught that Christ was not really God, but merely his greatest creature (Arians).

The Arian heresy became so widespread that most of the bishops fell into it and even the emperor

THE VIRTUOUS EXAMPLE OF LIVED CHRISTIANITY WAS A VERY POWERFUL FORCE FOR EVANGELISATION.

supported it, persecuting the Catholics. In the midst of the confusion, one heroic voice was raised against the tide – that of St Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. Exiled five times from his see, he remained faithful through every threat and enticement. His eloquence, his learning and his saintly character eventually turned the tide and restored the true faith. Arianism was finally condemned at the Council of Niceaea in 325 AD. Throughout this period, even though many shepherds of the flock had fallen into error, the faith had remained in the people, who were not convinced of the novelty.

Other heresies came upon the heels of these ones. The Donatists denied the validity of the sacraments given by those who had been sinners. The Iconoclasts saw the veneration of images as idolatry and smashed works of religious art all across the East. The Pelagians thought one did not need God or grace to be saved, and on and on it went. Each of these heresies served a valuable purpose, however. On each occasion they enabled prudent study of the articles of the faith to be undertaken and the true doctrine to be clearly stated. People cared to know about the things of God and, although a few might lose their way, most people experienced a valuable growth in their understanding of the truths of the faith.

**THE ROLE OF THE SAINTS**

What is more, providence was calling for the great saints to answer the challenges of the time. They took the faith they had inherited from the apostles and framed it in language that would forever after become familiar to Christians. St Ambrose of Milan taught the nature of the Church and how it should operate in the secular world. He received into the Church the great St Augustine, whose wonderful mother, St Monica, had pursued him

with her tears and her prayers for 13 long years, waiting for his conversion. St Augustine became the greatest figure of those early years. A great theologian, he replied to the attacks of the

heretics with a masterful explanation of how grace works in the Church. He also explained how a Christian must live in the world and he laid the basis for the beautiful world of Christendom, which would follow several centuries later.

Meanwhile, off in the East, Augustine's friend St Jerome was spending his life gathering the most ancient and reliable manuscripts of the